

STAR
WARSTM

STAR WARS™

Lives and Adventures Omnibus

Ryder Windham



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Includes

The Life and Legend of Obi-Wan Kenobi

The Life of Luke Skywalker

The Wrath of Darth Maul

The Rise and Fall of Darth Vader

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STAR WARS

THE LIFE AND LEGEND OF

OBI-WAN KENOBI

BY RYDER WINDHAM



**For Frank Thorne, my favorite
wizard, and everyone who ever wanted
a real lightsaber**

Prologue

Luke Skywalker was surprised to see the moisture vaporator standing beside Ben Kenobi's abandoned hut on Tatooine. Given that over three years had transpired since Ben left the desert planet, Luke had assumed the vaporator would be long gone, scavenged by the Jawas or Sand People. Incredibly, both the vaporator and Ben's hut appeared to be in good shape.

The sun-bleached dwelling hugged a remote, stony bluff in the Jundland Wastes with a sweeping view of the Western Dune Sea. Luke had landed his X-wing starfighter nearby, and was eager to get out from under Tatooine's blazing twin suns. But as he trudged across the rocky ground and drew closer to the plasteel door that was the entrance to Kenobi's hut, he sensed a strange tension in the air. It reminded him of the disturbing sensation he had felt on Dagobah, at the cave that was so strong with the dark side of the Force. But while that cave had radiated cold and death, and seemed to challenge and beckon Luke to enter, this was an entirely different feeling—as if the entire property were saying Go away.

However, Luke also sensed that the message was not for him. He wondered if Ben had used the Force to protect his home, and figured he'd find out soon enough.

The plasteel door was unlocked. Luke slid it open and stepped inside. The air was musty, but the shadowy interior offered at least some relief from the heat. Looking around at the various relics that rested on small tables and shelves, and the animal pelts stretched out on the semicircular couch that had

also served as Ben's bed, Luke couldn't see that anything had been damaged or stolen. The only obvious evidence of Ben's absence was the thin dusting of sand that covered everything.

Luke moved down into the small living area, where he found a vacuum-seal chest on the floor beside a structural column. It was from this chest that Ben had extracted Luke's first lightsaber, the same lightsaber that Ben claimed had previously belonged to Luke's father.

Luke brushed the sand from the chest's lid, then lifted it and looked inside.

It was empty.

Luke sighed. He hadn't expected the chest to contain a second lightsaber, but he had hoped to find something useful. If not a datatape or holographic recording, at least some kind of clue that might answer the questions that had been gnawing at him for months, ever since his duel with Darth Vader on Cloud City.

As he thought of that devastating encounter, which had cost him not only his inherited weapon but his right hand, he suddenly felt an aching sensation at his wrist. Phantom limb pain, he recalled. That was the term that the medical droid had used to describe the occasional ache that Luke might feel from time to time.

Luke flexed the lifelike, mechanical fingers of the prosthetic hand that the droid had so carefully attached to the end of his right arm. Veins, muscles, and bones had been replaced with wires, pistons, and metal, and sensory impulse lines even made his cybernetic fingers touch-sensitive. Despite the fact that Luke's original right hand had been lost in the reactor shaft at Cloud City, the medical droid—an expert with highly specialized techniques of genetic reconstruction—had replicated a perfect synthetic duplicate, right down to the fingerprints.

But the medical droid couldn't do anything about the phantom pain. Luke would have to live with that.

He continued his inspection of Ben's home. It didn't take long to find the trapdoor in the floor that led to the cellar. A short series of steps, hewn from bedrock, descended into darkness. Luke pulled a small glowrod from his belt, activated its light, and climbed down the steps. The cellar wasn't entirely

dark, as a scant, eerie light emanated from luminescent stone that was set in one wall.

Ben had used the cellar for food and water storage, and a small variety of dried fruits, vegetables, and meats—all of which now looked like collapsed bits of leather—remained strung to a metal pipe that traveled to a cistern. Luke also found a workbench that had been constructed from scrap metal. Tools were neatly arranged on shelves, but a few select tools rested on the workbench, as if waiting for their owner's return.

Then Luke spotted the box. It was an intricately carved boa-wood box, resting on the floor between the workbench and small auxiliary generator. Luke was moving the glowrod closer to the box when a sudden sound came from above.

Thud!

In a swift, fluid motion, Luke spun to his left as he reached fast for the blaster that was holstered at his right hip, and then sprang back toward the cellar steps. He brought his blaster up fast so that its barrel was angled up through the open trap door. An instant later, the air was filled by a panicked, electronic shriek.

The shriek came from the domed head of Luke's astromech droid, R2-D2, who had traveled with him and helped to evade the Imperial blockade around Tatooine. The startled droid unleashed a flurry of angry beeps as he peered down at Luke, then he stomped his treads at the edge of the trap door's opening, kicking up the layer of sand that rested on the floor of the upper room.

"Sorry, Artoo," Luke said as he lowered his blaster. "Guess I'm a little jumpy." As he returned his weapon to its holster, he muttered, "I'll probably stay that way until we find...Han."

Luke's throat was already dry from the desert heat, but as he said Han's name, he felt as if he might choke. He had no idea where his friend Han was, only that the armored bounty hunter Boba Fett had taken Han's carbonite-frozen body from Cloud City. Various reports confirmed that Boba Fett intended to deliver Han to the Tatooine-based gangster Jabba the Hutt, but so far, Boba Fett was a no-show. It was Luke's other friend, the Alliance leader Princess Leia Organa, who had instructed him to hide out on Tatooine and wait for some sign of Han.

Unfortunately, Luke had never been very good at waiting.

From above, R2-D2 emitted a series of soft electronic beeps and a short whistle. Recognizing the whistle's lilt as a concerned question from the droid, Luke replied, "I'm fine, Artoo. Go make sure the X-wing's camouflage net is secured, and I'll be up in a few minutes."

R2-D2 chirped a hesitant response, but then his motor whined and he backed away from the trapdoor. The movement pushed some sand toward the trapdoor, sending it streaming down into the cellar. Luke shook his head. One way or another, sand found its way into just about every place on Tatooine.

While R2-D2 headed back outside to inspect the X-wing, Luke returned to the boa-wood box and crouched down in front of it. Examining the box more closely with the glowrod, he noticed a tight cluster of buttons, and realized that the box was a keypad safe.

Luke stared hard at the keypad. Ben had never mentioned this box in his basement, and Luke could only imagine what the access code might be. Struggling to recall whether Ben had ever hinted at the code, Luke thought back to that fateful day when Ben—in the room just above Luke's head—had revealed himself to be a Jedi Knight and told Luke about the Force. Luke seriously doubted that Ben would have programmed any obvious letter combination, like JEDI or THE FORCE. He wished he could somehow ask Ben himself, but after their last exchange, that seemed very unlikely.

Since Dagobah, Luke had been on his own.

For a moment, he considered breaking the box open, using a small prybar he had noticed on the workbench, but then he dismissed the idea. As much as he was curious about the box's contents, he didn't want to damage it. He reached cautiously toward the box, brushing the tips of his fingers against the keypad.

Snap!

Luke flinched and pulled his fingers back as the keypad automatically slid aside on an inlaid track to reveal a thumbprint clasp. He wasn't sure what had just happened, but somehow, he had bypassed the keypad. He hesitated for a moment, then thought, Here goes nothing. He pressed his right thumb against the clasp.

Clack!

The clasp yielded to his touch, and Luke saw a thin black slit appear along the lower edge of the box's lid. He lifted the lid slowly with one hand, adjusted the glowrod with the other, and peered inside the box. The first thing he saw was a flashpacket, an explosive device that had been affixed near the back of the keypad.

Luke eyed the flashpacket warily. It certainly appeared that Ben had rigged the box to explode, but for whatever reason, it hadn't worked. Luke thought, Maybe it's a dud...

Another possibility suddenly struck him. Maybe Ben not only left this box behind for me, but also set it to explode if anyone else attempted to open it. But how? Did Ben somehow obtain my fingerprints? Did he foresee that I would lose my hand? Or was the clasp engineered to recognize me by the Force? Luke was mystified, but if it turned out that his fingerprints had been all that prevented the flashpacket from detonating, he would have another reason to be grateful to the medical droid who had recreated his hand.

Peering past the flashpacket, Luke saw that the box contained some rectangular objects. He recognized them as books. Although he was far more familiar with datapads for information storage, he had seen enough books in his lifetime to know how what they were and how to use them. The largest book was a leather-bound volume that appeared quite ancient. Luke picked it up, and noticed that it too was sealed by a thumbclasp.

He pressed his right thumb against the clasp. The clasp yielded without a sound.

Luke wasn't surprised to find another flashpacket, this one affixed behind the book's front cover. Nor was he surprised that the explosive didn't detonate. What surprised him were the handwritten words on the book's first page.

Luke,

The flashpackets were a necessary precaution. I trust you will dispose of them properly.

The future of the Jedi Knights is in your hands. Read these books and use them wisely.

May the Force be with you.

—Obi-Wan Kenobi

Luke blinked at the words as if to confirm they were real, that he wasn't just having a dream. The book felt suddenly heavy in his hands. He set it down carefully upon the workbench and, by the light of his glowrod, he began turning the pages. Every page was filled with handwritten text, and his heart began pounding harder as the various words and phrases caught his attention. Jedi Council...Old Republic...Battle of Naboo...Sith Lords...Jedi Temple...Separatist Movement...Battle of Geonosis...the Clone Wars...

Luke stopped to catch his breath. He knew he should start at the beginning, but the book was so thick, and he was impatient to find two names in particular. He began flipping through the pages even faster, scanning the text for the names—Anakin Skywalker and Darth Vader—that he believed were the keys to the answers he sought.

Ever since the duel on Cloud City, his thoughts had been dominated by two questions:

Is Darth Vader really my father?

And if he is, why didn't Ben tell me the truth?

The dull ache returned to Luke's right wrist, and he stopped turning pages. He hadn't found the names he was looking for, but had come to a section that contained Ben's instructions for the construction of lightsabers. The section included numerous illustrations by Ben himself.

Luke hadn't considered the possibility of building a lightsaber. Only after he lost his lightsaber at Cloud City did he realize that he had no idea where to obtain another one, let alone how to go about making one from scratch. Now, thanks to Ben's book, it seemed he might actually stand a good chance at replacing it.

A skilled Jedi can complete a basic lightsaber in a few days if necessary, but creating one for the first time can take many months. The most essential component is the focusing crystal, preferably a natural jewel, which can be...

Luke was transfixed, nearly forgetting his intent to find information about his father's identity. He flipped back a few pages and began reading from the beginning of the entry.

Like most Jedi younglings, I constructed my first lightsaber at the Jedi Temple on Coruscant. Although it was merely a competent weapon, I would be a liar if I said I built it purely for training exercises. I crafted it with much thought and care, and dared to imagine that it would serve me well in the future.

In fact, I did use the weapon during my earliest missions with my Master, but it was not until...

Seeing the word Master, Luke skimmed ahead. He suspected Ben was referring to Master Yoda, but he didn't see Yoda's name written anywhere. Luke went back to where he had left off.

...but it was not until after we went to Ilum, when I was still in my thirteenth year, that I learned the true power of a lightsaber.

Luke turned the page. He had expected the journal to provide details about what Kenobi had experienced in his thirteenth year that made him learn "the true power of a lightsaber," but as he read through the next few pages, it appeared that the elder Jedi may have kept that information to himself. Ben had also mentioned being "on Ilum," but there wasn't another mention of Ilum either, at least not that Luke could plainly see.

Luke frowned. Although he was eager to read the entire book, he also believed that building a new lightsaber might be his first priority. According to Ben's instructions, first-time efforts at lightsaber construction could "take months." Luke and his allies didn't know Han Solo's current whereabouts and had yet to formulate a rescue plan, but if they were going up against Boba Fett or Jabba the Hutt, Luke had a feeling that a lightsaber would be useful.

As Luke reexamined the instructions for lightsaber construction, his thoughts returned to Obi-Wan at age thirteen. What was he like then? Luke wished he could have known more.

Chapter One

Although the Jedi Order had deliberately banished Ilum from all standard star charts for many centuries, almost every Jedi trainee dreamed of visiting the sacred, secret planet in the Unknown Regions. That was because many generations of Jedi had gathered crystals from Ilum to energize their lightsabers, and some Jedi maintained that Ilum crystals were the finest in the galaxy.

Constructing a lightsaber on Ilum was not regarded as the most challenging trial for a Jedi apprentice, but to Obi-Wan, it was confirmation that he would become a Jedi Knight. And if anyone appreciated the opportunity to become a Jedi, it was Obi-Wan. Less than a year earlier, when he was still just a few weeks shy of his thirteenth birthday, he was nearly convinced that no Jedi Knight or Master would ever choose him as an apprentice.

But those days were behind him now. The Jedi Knight Qui-Gon Jinn, with some encouragement from Master Yoda, had taken Obi-Wan as his Padawan. Granted, they had gotten off to a rough start, and it only became rougher when Obi-Wan temporarily renounced the Jedi Order to join the revolution on the planet Melida/Daan, a decision that he quickly came to regret. Qui-Gon had forgiven him and accepted his return, but there remained an uneasiness between them. Still, despite their

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disagreements and conflicts, a bond *had* developed, and both were confident this bond would grow stronger over time.

And so it was that Obi-Wan and his Master, traveling in a small transport ship on loan from the Galactic Senate, had made the pilgrimage to the snow-covered world of Ilum. As Obi-Wan meditated over the blue crystal he had just harvested from the frigid cavern, Qui-Gon stood a short distance away, watching.

Using the Force, Obi-Wan Kenobi maneuvered the components of his lightsaber so that they hovered in the air in front of him. The blue crystal rotated slowly, then drifted into place within the lightsaber's energy chamber. Focusing all his attention on the components, he sealed the compartment, and then adjusted a locking mechanism. The lightsaber's assembly was complete.

With his lightsaber still floating before him, Obi-Wan shifted his gaze to his Master. Like Obi-Wan, Qui-Gon was wearing an insulated robe to protect him from the cold. Qui-Gon's eyes were on the floating lightsaber, but Obi-Wan thought he detected something distant in the man's expression, as if his thoughts were elsewhere.

Obi-Wan's lightsaber wavered slightly. Obi-Wan waited a few seconds, then said, "Are you not supposed to say a few words, Master?"

Qui-Gon's eyes flicked to Obi-Wan's. "Ah, yes," he said. Returning his gaze to the hovering lightsaber, he recited, "*The crystal is the heart of the blade. The heart is the crystal of the Jedi. The Jedi is the crystal of the Force. The Force is the blade of the heart. All are intertwined: the crystal, the blade, the Jedi. You...are one.*"

Obi-Wan heard Qui-Gon's hesitation in the final sentence, and thought he detected a hint of sorrow or regret in his Master's voice. As he reached out to grasp the floating lightsaber and lower it to his side, he said, "Have I done something wrong, Master?"

"No, Padawan," Qui-Gon answered. "You've done well. I regret it is I, for a change, who is not being mindful of the

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moment.” Then Qui-Gon looked away, letting his gaze sweep over the cavern’s interior. “It is unfortunate that such wondrous surroundings could become diminished by foolish memories.”

Obi-Wan shook his head. “I am sorry, Master, but I don’t understand.”

Qui-Gon returned his gaze to Obi-Wan and said, “The last time I stood in this chamber, it was with Xanatos.”

Obi-Wan swallowed hard. Xanatos had been Qui-Gon’s previous Jedi apprentice. Strong with the Force and a brave warrior, Xanatos had served alongside Qui-Gon on numerous missions, but ultimately left the Jedi Order to ally with his biological father, a corrupt governor who had initiated a civil war on their homeworld, Telos IV. Qui-Gon had been forced to kill Xanatos’s father, an act that did nothing to stop or divert Xanatos on his path to the dark side.

For years afterward, Qui-Gon had maintained that he might never take another apprentice, and that he eventually did was much to Obi-Wan’s credit. But shortly after Obi-Wan became Qui-Gon’s Padawan, Xanatos reemerged, seeking revenge against his former Master—and nearly destroying the Jedi Temple in the process. Obi-Wan had been with Qui-Gon when they caught up with Xanatos on Telos IV, and neither was able to stop the dark, former Jedi from deliberately ending his own life by plunging into a boiling black pool of acid.

“Xanatos wasn’t your fault,” Obi-Wan blurted out without thinking. Qui-Gon had not asked for his opinion, and he felt his face flush.

“Perhaps you’re right,” Qui-Gon replied. “But for a time, Xanatos *was* my responsibility. And he was also my friend.”

Obi-Wan had no response for this. He had come to regard Xanatos as an embodiment of evil, and had a hard time believing that he could have ever been a friend to anyone.

Obi-Wan also felt a bit stung. The trip to Ilum was important to him, and he hadn’t expected his Master’s thoughts to dwell on Xanatos. He almost wished that Qui-Gon’s memory of the failed

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apprentice had dissolved along with Xanatos himself on Telos IV, but he immediately buried the thought and banished it from his mind. Such a line of thinking could only lead to the dark side—Obi-Wan didn't need Master Yoda, Qui-Gon, or anyone else to remind him of that.

Qui-Gon sighed. "You have worked very hard toward this day, and I regret I allowed unpleasant memories to intrude. Forgive me, Obi-Wan."

Obi-Wan was taken aback by his Master's request for forgiveness. Although he wasn't sure whether to speak, he said, "I...I forgive you, Master."

"Then all is well," Qui-Gon said, smiling as he placed his broad hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder. "Come now, let us see the result of your handiwork, this blade you have created by the will of the Force."

Stepping back from Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan held his lightsaber out in front of him and thumbed the activation switch. The beam ignited, and the cavern's crystal-lined walls reflected its brilliant blue light as they magnified the sound of the weapon's distinctive hum.

Obi-Wan had been raised at the Jedi Temple and had more experience with lightsabers than many Padawans his age. Still, his eyes went wide with surprise as he beheld the brilliant beam that extended before him. He had expected that the Ilum crystal would produce a more intense beam than the weapon's previous crystal, which he had selected from a supply at the Jedi Temple's lightsaber crafting facility. But he was not prepared for the way the Ilum crystal would make the weapon feel in his grasp.

It was different somehow. He tested it, sweeping the blade through the air. The blade was still pure energy and without weight, but it seemed more precise and focused.

Obi-Wan looked to Qui-Gon, who smiled as if he could read his Padawan's thoughts. Qui-Gon said, "Some Jedi claim that Ilum crystals make one feel more connected with the Force."

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Before Obi-Wan could comment, a beeping sound came from the comlink at Qui-Gon's belt. Obi-Wan deactivated his lightsaber as Qui-Gon removed the comlink, listened briefly, and then said into it, "On our way."

"What is it, Master?"

"A mission," Qui-Gon said, returning the comlink to his belt. "We're to go to Ord Sigatt."

"Ord Sigatt?" Obi-Wan shook his head. "I've never heard of it."

"It's in the Outer Rim Territories."

Obi-Wan lifted his eyebrows. It wasn't every day that Jedi were assigned to the Outer Rim. He said, "Isn't that a little out of our usual jurisdiction?"

"Not when a Republic refinery ship and its crew goes missing there."

Qui-Gon turned and headed for the mouth of the cave. Obi-Wan clipped his lightsaber to his belt as he followed, walking fast to keep up with his Master's long strides. They returned to their transport, set the coordinates for Ord Sigatt into the navicomputer, and lifted away from the frozen world. Minutes later, they were racing through hyperspace to the Outer Rim.

Twelve thousand years before Obi-Wan's lifetime, when the Galactic Republic was attempting to expand its government beyond the more traveled trade routes, the Republic established advance military and scout bases on several remote worlds. These planets and moons were designated as *Ords*, an abbreviation of Ordnance/Regional Depots. Over time, the Jedi Order replaced the Republic militia, and some of the Ords evolved into weapons disposal centers and storage facilities, while others were adopted by colonists.

Ord Sigatt was a small, rocky planet with mostly barren terrain and a few scattered lakes. For centuries, its modest population consisted of people who stayed only until they found somewhere else to go. Some longtime colonists lived on the outskirts of the

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main settlement, but most lived close to the spaceport, the energy station, or the water treatment facility that made up the main settlement. As for tourism, most travelers regarded Ord Sigatt as little more than a place to rest or refuel their ships. But all that changed after a prospector's recent discovery of a large deposit of carvanium, a metal used in alloys such as durasteel.

Almost overnight, Ord Sigatt was transformed into a mining world. Many colonists became instantly wealthy when they sold their properties to offworld consortiums. Mammoth vehicles were delivered to excavate the carvanium, and the spaceport expanded to accommodate the refinery ships. The settlement's population increased rapidly with migrant laborers and soldiers of fortune, and a sprawl of temporary housing had sprung up for the new arrivals.

Obi-Wan reviewed these details during his journey with his Master through hyperspace, the time-space dimension that allowed for faster-than-light-speed travel between planets. Studying transmitted data from the Jedi Temple, Obi-Wan said, "The missing refinery ship was the *Hardy Harrow* from Denon, and is owned by Denon-Ardru Mutual. The ship had been scheduled to pick up a shipment of carvanium two days ago, but when it failed to return to Republic space, a Denon Senator notified the Council."

"Any comment from Ord Sigatt Spaceport?" Qui-Gon asked.

"They say the *Hardy Harrow* never reached Ord Sigatt."

"What about recent acts of piracy or space weather anomalies in the system? Has anything been reported?"

"No, Master." A signal light flashed on the transport's console and Obi-Wan looked to a sensor screen. "We're coming out of hyperspace."

There was a slight shudder as the transport dropped out of hyperspace and entered realspace. Outside the transport's cockpit transparisteel window, a rush of bright light washed away from view and was replaced by a solitary planet amidst a field of

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distant stars. Obi-Wan confirmed that the planet was Ord Sigatt, then said, "I'll notify the spaceport that we'll be arriving in—"

"Easy, now, Padawan," Qui-Gon interrupted. "For all we know, the spaceport authorities may have something to do with the missing refinery. Let us arrive unannounced. We'll land in one of the public hangars on the outskirts."

After gaining clearance from the spaceport, they landed their transport in an open-roof hangar. Obi-Wan was somewhat relieved to learn that Ord Sigatt's climate was considerably warmer than Ilum, but as they stepped down the transport's landing ramp, he realized the air was not nearly so clean.

A starship maintenance droid directed them to the hangar's exit. They had almost reached the exit when two uniformed security guards stepped out from the shadows to block their path. Both guards had blaster rifles slung over their shoulders, and their hard expressions indicated that they were prepared to use the weapons if necessary. One of the guards looked at Qui-Gon and snarled, "Either of you carrying weapons?"

Qui-Gon raised his right hand slowly and made a slight sweeping gesture with his fingers as he said, "We don't have any weapons."

Both guards were unaware that Qui-Gon was using the Force to manipulate their minds. The guard who had addressed Qui-Gon nodded and said, "No, you don't have any weapons."

"We're just harmless traders," Qui-Gon added. "You can let us go on our way."

"Totally harmless," the guard answered. "Go on, then." He and his partner stepped aside, allowing the two Jedi to move through the exit.

They stepped out onto a busy street, filled with pedestrian traffic and lined with merchant stalls. They walked past the stalls, keeping their lightsabers concealed within their robes. As they moved along, Qui-Gon leaned close to Obi-Wan and said in a low voice, "Notice anything unusual about the locals?"

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Obi-Wan surveyed the area. He saw a mix of humans and aliens from various worlds, and most wore work clothes and coveralls. Some were seated at tables with food set out in the shade of a nearby hangar. All of the merchants seemed very focused on their customers.

Obi-Wan shrugged. "Well," he said, "it doesn't seem much different from any other spaceport on a backwater world. Except that people around here look glummer than most." It was true. No one appeared to be very happy about being on Ord Sigatt.

Qui-Gon said, "There's also the fact that no one is carrying any weapons."

As Obi-Wan's eyes flicked from one person to the next, he quickly confirmed his Master's observation. Except for the security guards that they'd left behind in the hangar, not a single being was wearing a holster or bearing weapons of any kind.

"That *is* unusual," Obi-Wan said. "Nothing in the report from the Jedi Council mentioned that blasters were prohibited. Maybe it's just the way the locals maintain peace."

"Maybe," Qui-Gon said, but Obi-Wan could tell that his Master was skeptical.

A trio of spacers walked by, and the Jedi watched the men enter a nearby bar, one of the older-looking buildings on the block. Qui-Gon said, "I might be able to pick up some information in there. You wait outside. I'll be back in a few minutes."

A few seconds after Qui-Gon entered the old building, Obi-Wan heard a loud crash. It had sounded from the alley right around the corner, which ran perpendicular to the main street. After a quick glance back toward the door of the bar, he walked around the corner and found himself looking at a burly Besalisk. The four-armed alien wore a stained apron and held two trays in his lower hands. A clutter of empty bottles lay scattered around his wide feet. It appeared he had just accidentally dropped the bottles.

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Obi-Wan was about to turn back when the Besalisk, grumbling to himself, stooped down and began loading the bottles onto the trays with his upper arms. Obi-Wan was amazed at how fast the alien's hands moved. The Besalisk was reaching toward the last cup when he looked up at Obi-Wan. Eyes wide with surprise, the alien said, "Aw, nuts." Then he lowered the trays to the ground, raised all four of his meaty, four-fingered hands in the air and said, "I surrender."

Confused, Obi-Wan said, "You do?"

"I know better than to mess with Jedi," the Besalisk said, his bristly whiskers trembling slightly. "Even youngsters like yourself."

Suddenly self-conscious, Obi-Wan glanced down to make sure his lightsaber had not accidentally become exposed. Seeing that it was still concealed beneath his robes, he returned his gaze to the Besalisk and said, "Who told you I was a Jedi?"

Arms still raised, the Besalisk chuckled, "*You* did, son. For one thing, you've got a Jedi apprentice's braid dangling down your shoulder. Also, maybe you don't know this, the weave of Jedi robes is pretty distinctive. The real giveaway was when you looked to your hip to make sure your lightsaber wasn't showing. Anyway, you caught Dexter Jettster fair and square."

Obi-Wan was astonished by the Besalisk's powers of observation. Taking a step into the alley, he kept his expression neutral as he said cautiously, "So...Dexter Jettster...you must *also* know why I'm here."

"Gotta hand it to you," Jettster said, winking at Obi-Wan. "I knew I couldn't keep running blasters out of my bar forever. I just never imagined Jedi would come after me."

Running blasters? Obi-Wan was baffled by Jettster's admission.

The Besalisk continued, "I won't beg for mercy. I know I done wrong. But I swear, Denon-Ardru Mutual and their security goons are the real troublemakers. Bad enough they take over the local government and confiscate everyone's weapons in the name of *their* law, but when they go stealing land from colonists here,

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well, I just had to do *something*. You'll find all the blasters in the back room of the bar. Hadn't begun distributing them to my friends yet."

As he listened, Obi-Wan's nimble mind began sifting through the information, connecting details that he already knew. He said, "Where is the *Hardy Harrow*?"

"Hidden in a valley, about twenty kilometers north of here," Jettster said. "It's not damaged. My friends and I here, we captured the ship shortly after it arrived in orbit and removed its transponder. We just wanted Denon-Ardru to know that we weren't going to leave Ord Sigatt without a fight."

"Did you harm the crew?"

"The *crew*?" Jettster wrinkled his brow at this, then said, "Come on, you know as well as I do that the *Harrow* is a drone barge, doesn't have a crew except for the droids that...that..." Jettster gasped, then he narrowed his gaze at Obi-Wan.

"Go on," Obi-Wan said.

Jettster shook his thick head. "Son of a gundark," he said. "You got me, Jedi. You tried to hide it, but I can see it in your eyes right now. You had no idea that I was up to anything but dropping bottles before I opened my big mouth. Until one minute ago, I prided myself on how well I kept secrets, but now—"

"*Help!*"

The cry—it sounded like a child's voice—came from outside the alley, behind Obi-Wan. He turned his head fast to see three security guards, carrying blaster rifles and clad in the same uniforms as the pair who'd stopped him and Qui-Gon at the hangar. One of the guards was gripping the collar of a young boy, who looked about nine years old. A younger child, a girl, clutched at the boy protectively.

Obi-Wan shot a severe glance at Jettster and said, "Stay here!" Then he ran out of the alley, where pedestrians had already formed a small crowd around the guards and the two children.

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The guard who had grabbed at the boy growled, “I saw you throw that rock at me, whelp! Now you’re going to pay for it!”

“Unhand him,” Obi-Wan said as he moved toward the guards.

Keeping one hand on the boy’s collar, the guard glanced at Obi-Wan and barked, “Back off, kid!” And then he shifted his blaster rifle, bringing it up toward Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan’s lightsaber flashed, sweeping through the rifle’s barrel. The guard released the boy, who fell back into his young sister’s arms as the shattered barrel fell and rolled across the street. The other two guards moved as if they were about to raise their own rifles, but then they looked beyond the blazing lightsaber to meet Obi-Wan’s gaze.

“A Jedi,” murmured a voice from the crowd. “He’s a Jedi!”

A silence fell over the street, all eyes on Obi-Wan and the guards. Obi-Wan was about to order the guards to drop their weapons, but before he could get a word out, the entire crowd broke out in an exultant cheer.

Obi-Wan kept his eyes trained on the guards. As the crowd continued to cheer for the Jedi, the guards dropped their weapons. While the unarmed guards shifted nervously in the middle of the street, Obi-Wan felt a finger gently tapping at his right shoulder. He turned to see Qui-Gon standing behind him, and quickly deactivated his lightsaber.

Raising his voice so he could be heard over the applauding crowd, Qui-Gon said, “Should I have reminded you to stay out of trouble?”

Obi-Wan retorted, “*You* asked me to wait outside!” Remembering Dexter Jettster, he glanced back to the alley, where he saw Jettster leaning against the wall outside the bar. Jettster had joined in the applause, clapping hands with his two upper arms while using his lower hands to point to the ground. Jettster had stayed where he was told.

Obi-Wan thought, *He’s really not a bad guy. Quite helpful, actually.*

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Returning his gaze to his Master, Obi-Wan said, “Before you issue reprimands, shall I tell you where we’ll find the *Hardy Harrow*?”

Qui-Gon stared at Obi-Wan for a moment, then said, “And just how did you come by this information?”

“A little four-winged bird told me.”

Denon-Ardru Mutual had sent a small army of security guards to Ord-Sigatt, but all of the guards surrendered without protest to the Jedi. After all, they had been paid only to push *ordinary* people around. The guards returned to Denon in the *Hardy Harrow*, but without the carvanium shipment.

Neither the Galactic Senate nor the Jedi Council was pleased by a Denon Senator’s attempt to use the Jedi to recover an unmanned drone barge, especially when they discovered the same Senator had a controlling interest in maintaining Denon-Ardru Mutual’s secret monopoly on the carvanium from Ord Sigatt.

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon remained on Ord-Sigatt for a few days to help return the local government to normal. They spent a good deal of time with Dexter Jettster, who not only impressed them with his keen observational skills and memory, but with his excellent cooking. It was during one meal that Jettster faced Obi-Wan and said, “Do you know the true power of a lightsaber?”

“The *true* power?” Obi-Wan echoed. He looked to Qui-Gon for support.

Qui-Gon said, “It’s a fair question.”

Returning his gaze to Jettster, Obi-Wan said, “Well, I suppose it’s the lightsaber’s ability to cut through almost anything.”

Dexter beamed. “That’s what I *used* to think,” he said as he pushed another plate of food toward Qui-Gon. “But then one day, I saw a young Jedi named Obi-Wan Kenobi activate his lightsaber on Ord Sigatt. And that was when I learned the weapon’s true power.”

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Obi-Wan shifted in his chair at the dining table. "I...I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Cutting through things is merely a lightsaber's technical function," Jettster continued. "But its real power is in the eye of the beholder. The sight of a lightsaber can inspire great fear, but it can also inspire great hope. It all depends on whether one regards the Jedi as friend or foe." Reaching out with his right upper arm, Jettster placed his hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder and said, "With one quick sweep of a lightsaber, you gave hope to everyone who saw your blade. Except for the bad guys, that is. Your lightsaber brought *them* to their knees, and without spilling a drop of blood."

"Well," Obi-Wan said, "I *did* destroy the one guard's blaster—"

"Haw!" Dexter laughed. "That you did, but still...consider this, my young friend. Many weapons can kill, but only the lightsaber can inspire such extremes of hope or fear. And I shall add that I will be forever glad that only Jedi carry lightsabers." He raised his glass to Qui-Gon.

As the Jedi prepared to leave Ord-Sigatt, Jettster walked with them back to their waiting transport. As they neared the hangar, Jettster pulled Obi-Wan aside and whispered, "Listen, son. Thanks for not telling anyone how I blabbed about the blasters or the missing freighter. You saved my reputation."

Obi-Wan grinned. "Take care of yourself, Dexter," he said, extending his hand.

"A handshake just won't do, son," Dexter said, and he grabbed the boy and lifted him off his feet to embrace him in a four-armed hug. "Until we meet again."

Interlude

With Ben Kenobi's journal spread open before him, Luke Skywalker reviewed the instructions for building lightsabers. Ben's cellar workshop was equipped with most of the tools he would need, but he would have to collect most of the weapon's electronic and mechanical parts from dealers, which meant a trip to one of Tatooine's spaceports. Mos Espa was closer to Ben's house, but was also crawling with Imperial spies, so he would have to go to Mos Eisley. Princess Leia, Han Solo's first mate Chewbacca the Wookiee, and their new ally Lando Calrissian were already in Mos Eisley, trying to gain information about the whereabouts of Boba Fett. Luke was expecting his friends to arrive soon and give him an update, so he could then ride back with them to Mos Eisley.

As for the lightsaber's focusing crystal, that would be the real trick. Because he didn't have any natural jewels at his disposal, he would need to build or buy a small furnace to create and form the jewel, and then he would have to cut the jewel and polish it. There was also the matter of installing the crystal and tuning the lightsaber's photoharmonics. Although Ben's instructions were clearly written, it seemed the entire construction process was an inexact science, and possibly dangerous. If Luke made even a minor error, the lightsaber could explode in his hands.

Luke was sitting at the low round table in Ben's living area as he prepared a list of components he hoped to obtain in Mos Eisley. Lifting his gaze, Luke saw R2-D2 standing on the other side of the table, watching

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him. It had been in this same room that Ben had first told Luke about how his father had been a Jedi Knight, who was betrayed and murdered by Ben's pupil, Darth Vader. Recalling Vader's contradictory claim at Cloud City, Luke wished he knew the whole story.

Ben had described Luke's father as a cunning warrior and a good friend. On Dagobah, Master Yoda had commented that Luke, like his father, had "much anger" in him. Were they even talking about the same person?

Luke wanted to read more of Ben's journal, but then he heard a landspeeder approach. He peered out a window to confirm the speeder carried Leia and the others. He quickly returned Ben's journal to the box in the cellar, then instructed R2-D2 to stand guard while he went to Mos Eisley. As he left Ben's house, he found himself wondering absently, I wonder what my father was like when Ben first met him?

Chapter Two

Qui-Gon should have returned by now, thought Obi-Wan Kenobi. He sat in the bridge of the gleaming Naboo Royal Starship, which had landed at the outskirts of Mos Espa Spaceport on the remote planet Tatooine. Obi-Wan was now twenty-five years old, and in his twelve years as Qui-Gon Jinn's apprentice, he had come to know his Master's eccentricities well.

Although Qui-Gon was regarded as a most capable Jedi Knight, he also had a reputation for ignoring rules and following his own instincts. He routinely questioned authority, including the Jedi Council. He had even turned down at least one opportunity to join the Council because he refused to be tied down to their "orthodox philosophies." He had excellent manners but seemed to prefer food that did not require utensils. He was almost overwhelmingly empathetic with all life forms, even if the creature happened to be some monster that was trying to take his head off.

But Obi-Wan had never known Qui-Gon to behave quite so irrationally as he had over the past two days. Looking out the bridge's viewport and seeing no sign of Qui-Gon on the surrounding desert wastes, he thought, *What's taking him so long?*

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Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan were acting as emergency guardians for Queen Amidala of Naboo. Their original mission had been to dispel the Neimoidian Trade Federation's illegal blockade of Naboo, but that was before the Trade Federation's droids destroyed their Republic cruiser and tried to kill them. Hoping to deliver Amidala to Coruscant, where she could formally protest the Trade Federation's actions, the Jedi had fled Naboo with the Queen's entourage in the Royal Starship, only to be immediately attacked by Trade Federation forces. Had it not been for the swift action of the astromech droid R2-D2, who managed to repair the ship's damaged shield generator while under heavy fire, they never would have survived the escape. Unfortunately, the starship's T-14 hyperdrive was damaged beyond repair, leaving them unable to continue to Coruscant.

Seeking a safe place to land, Obi-Wan had used the ship's navicomputer to locate Tatooine, a desert world that was small, out of the way, and poor. These aspects, along with the fact that Tatooine was controlled by the Hutts, ensured that the Trade Federation had no presence on the world.

Shortly after their landing, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan had both acknowledged that they felt a disturbance in the Force. Obi-Wan had remained with the ship while Qui-Gon led a small party to obtain a replacement hyperdrive from a parts dealership in Mos Espa. After that, the detour to Tatooine had taken a series of even stranger turns.

Evidently, there was only one working-condition T-14 hyperdrive available in Mos Espa, but its junk-dealer owner—Watto, a Toydarian who was immune to Jedi mind tricks—refused to accept the Republic credits that Qui-Gon offered. But Qui-Gon had also encountered a nine-year-old boy, a slave owned by Watto, who wanted to help the Jedi. Much to Obi-Wan's bafflement, Qui-Gon had endorsed the boy's plan to compete in a Podrace so that he might win a cash prize, which he would then donate for the purchase of the hyperdrive.

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Apparently, the boy's mother—also Watto's slave—had supported this plan, too.

But that was only part of the story. The night before the Podrace, Qui-Gon had discreetly acquired a blood sample from the boy and transmitted the sample's data to Obi-Wan. Using an analysis device in the starship, Obi-Wan had confirmed that the boy had a midi-chlorian count that was over 20,000 per cell, which was higher than Master Yoda's.

Obi-Wan wondered how such a thing could be possible. *Could the boy be stronger with the Force than Yoda?* Although he understood why Qui-Gon would find the boy intriguing, he also wondered if the boy had become a distraction to their mission.

What could Qui-Gon be thinking? Even with that kind of midi-chlorian count, the boy's too old to begin Jedi training. It's not as if we can do anything beyond possibly liberating him from the Toydarian's ownership.

As things had turned out, the boy won the Podrace and also his freedom. Following the race, Qui-Gon had returned to the starship and delivered the necessary parts, but then declared that he was going back to Mos Espa for "some unfinished business," and instructed Obi-Wan to install the hyperdrive unit.

Which Obi-Wan had done. The ship was ready to launch. They were just waiting for Qui-Gon.

Where is he?

The disturbance in the Force was almost tangible, as if an ominous current charged the air. Obi-Wan rose from his seat on the bridge and glanced at the ship's pilot, Ric Olié, who had so skillfully guided them through the blockade at Naboo. Olié appeared relatively composed as he checked his instrument console, completely oblivious to the disturbance Obi-Wan sensed.

Suddenly the door behind them slid open. Obi-Wan turned to see a young, blond-haired boy in ragged clothes lead the Queen's head of security Captain Panaka and handmaiden Padmé Naberrie onto the bridge.

"Qui-Gon's in trouble!" Panaka said.

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Because the Queen's safety was the top priority of the mission, Obi-Wan looked to Ric Olié and said, "Take off." As Olié's fired up the engines, Obi-Wan hunkered down beside the pilot and peered through the viewport. Outside, a short distance from the starship, he saw two figures engaged in a lightsaber duel. One figure was Qui-Gon. The other was a black-robed humanoid wielding a red lightsaber.

"Over there," Obi-Wan instructed the pilot. "Fly low."

The starship lifted off the ground and traveled fast toward Qui-Gon's position. Olié retracted the landing gear but left the portside hatch open and its boarding ramp extended. Obi-Wan kept his eyes on the duel. The sweeping blades had become a furious, deadly blur as they smashed again and again at each other. He could only imagine the identity and origin of Qui-Gon's opponent, or where the creature had learned to fight with a lightsaber, but he had never seen Qui-Gon engaged with such a deadly adversary.

Obi-Wan lost sight of Qui-Gon as the ship traveled over the duelists, but then Olié pointed to a monitor and said, "He's onboard!" The monitor displayed an interior view of the forward hold. Qui-Gon had leapt onto the boarding ramp and rolled into the rapidly rising starship.

Obi-Wan raced for the forward hold, the boy following at his heels. Entering the hold, they found R2-D2 beside Qui-Gon's supine form. The boy cried out, "Are you all right?"

"I think so," Qui-Gon answered breathlessly as he pushed himself up to a seated position. Obi-Wan and the boy crouched down beside him.

"What was it?" Obi-Wan asked.

"I'm not sure," Qui-Gon replied, still gasping, "but it was well-trained in the Jedi arts."

R2-D2 emitted a worried beep, and then Qui-Gon continued, "My guess is it was after the Queen."

The boy's eyes went wide with worry at this, and he exclaimed, "What are we gonna do about it?"

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Obi-Wan glanced at the boy. *We?*

Qui-Gon sighed, then faced Anakin and said, “We shall be patient.” Then he gestured from the boy to his apprentice and said, “Anakin Skywalker, meet Obi-Wan Kenobi.”

“Hi,” Anakin said as he pumped Obi-Wan’s hand. “Are you a Jedi, too?”

Obi-Wan smiled politely and nodded.

Anakin smiled back. “Pleased to meet you.”

He looks so...ordinary, Obi-Wan thought. Despite the fact that Jedi were trained from an early age to know that people as well as things were not always what they appeared, Obi-Wan would never have guessed or imagined that the boy beside him might be more powerful than Master Yoda.

After delivering Queen Amidala to Coruscant, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon brought Anakin to the Jedi Temple. There, the small, green-skinned Jedi Master Yoda, Mace Windu, and their ten fellow members of the Jedi Council were alarmed to hear Qui-Gon’s account of his duel on Tatooine. For a thousand years, the Jedi Order had believed that their deadliest enemies, the Sith, were extinct, but after listening to Qui-Gon, they suspected that the Sith had at long last resurfaced.

The Jedi Council and Obi-Wan were even more astonished when Qui-Gon asserted his belief that Anakin Skywalker had been conceived by the midi-chlorians, and that he was the Chosen One, a Jedi who would fulfill an ancient prophecy to destroy the Sith and bring balance to the Force. Despite the fact that most Jedi were brought into the Jedi Order at infancy, the Jedi Council reluctantly agreed to test Anakin’s powers.

While the tests were in progress, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon adjourned to a Temple balcony. The sun was setting over Galactic City, and there was heavy air traffic in the sky. Obi-Wan said, “The boy will not pass the Council’s tests, Master. He’s too old.”

Qui-Gon replied. “Anakin will become a Jedi, I promise you.”

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“Do not defy the Council, Master...not again.”

“I shall do what I must, Obi-Wan.”

“If you just follow the code, you would *be* on the Council. They will not go along with you this time.”

Qui-Gon placed his hand on Obi-Wan’s shoulder and said, “You still have much to learn, my young apprentice.”

Obi-Wan gazed out across the surrounding skyscrapers. “What if the boy decides he wants to be with his mother?”

“That would be Anakin’s choice,” Qui-Gon said. “However, I’ve already taken a step to help his mother. I’ve arranged for a courier to go to Tatooine and deliver a Toba lens to Shmi Skywalker.”

“A Toba lens?” Obi-Wan said. “You mean the crystal used to convert heat to light, the type used to power Renatta photon drives?”

Qui-Gon nodded. “The Toydarian who owns Shmi won’t accept Republic credits, and he would be suspicious, to say the least, if Shmi suddenly had any large amount of currency to buy her freedom. However, I believe that if Shmi acquired an item such as a Toba lens, she would recognize its value as a bargaining chip.”

Obi-Wan shook his head. “You can be most baffling, Master.”

Qui-Gon shrugged. “As I said, you have much to learn.”

After the tests were done, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon rejoined Anakin before the Council. As Obi-Wan had predicted, the Council deemed Anakin too old to become a Jedi. Yoda said the boy would *not* be trained.

“He *is* the Chosen One,” Qui-Gon maintained. “You must see it.”

Yoda closed his large, wise eyes and tilted his small head back. “Mmm. Clouded, this boy’s future is.”

Obi-Wan sensed what the members of the Council were thinking. *They all believe Anakin is dangerous.*

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"I will train him, then," Qui-Gon said, calmly but still defiantly. Stepping beside Anakin, he placed his hands on the boy's shoulders and proclaimed, "I take him as my Padawan learner."

Indicating Obi-Wan, Yoda said "An apprentice, you *have*, Qui-Gon. Impossible, to take on a second."

"The code forbids it," added Mace Windu.

Qui-Gon said, "Obi-Wan is ready."

Facing Yoda, Obi-Wan stepped forward to stand beside Qui-Gon and declared, "I am ready to face the trials."

"Our *own* counsel we will keep on who is ready," Yoda said.

Qui-Gon said, "He is headstrong, and he has much to learn about the living Force, but he is capable. There is little more he will learn from me."

Obi-Wan glared at Qui-Gon. *First he says I still have much to learn, and now he says this?*

"Decided later young Skywalker's fate will be," Yoda said.

Mace Windu announced that the Senate was voting for a new Supreme Chancellor, and that Queen Amidala planned to return to Naboo and put pressure on the Trade Federation to end the blockade. The Council assigned Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan to escort Amidala home, and allowed Qui-Gon to take Anakin with him.

As Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon prepared to board Amidala's starship with Anakin and R2-D2, Obi-Wan argued with Qui-Gon. "It is not disrespect, Master, it is the truth."

"From your point of view," Qui-Gon countered.

"The boy is *dangerous*," Obi-Wan said. Referring to the Jedi Council, he added, "They all sense it. Why can't you?"

"His fate is uncertain. He's not dangerous. The Council will decide Anakin's future. That should be enough for you. Now get on board."

Shortly after arriving on Naboo, while Queen Amidala sought military aid from the Naboo's indigenous Gungan warriors, Obi-Wan conferred with Qui-Gon at the edge of a green forest. Obi-

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Wan said, "I'm...I'm sorry for my behavior, Master. It's not my place to disagree with you about the boy. And I *am* grateful you think I'm ready to take the trials."

"You've been a good apprentice, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said with a smile. "And you're a much wiser man than I am. I foresee you will become a great Jedi Knight."

At Theed, a city on Naboo, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon became separated from Anakin when they were attacked by the same black-clad warrior they had encountered on Tatooine. The mysterious enemy, whose yellow-eyed face bore jagged red and black tattoos, quickly revealed that his lightsaber had not one blade, but two. He spun and whipped at the Jedi with intense ferocity, and it was all they could do to keep up with him.

The duel lasted several brutal minutes, taking the Jedi and their deadly foe from the Theed hangar to the city's immense power generator. As they moved through a security hallway, the three combatants found themselves temporarily barred from each other by a series of energized barriers. The barriers lifted, allowing Qui-Gon to catch up with their opponent at the edge of the power generator's virtually fathomless core, but before Obi-Wan could reach his Master's side, the energy barrier reactivated to stop him in his tracks.

And then the creature drove his lightsaber straight through Qui-Gon's chest. Obi-Wan shouted as he saw his Master's body crumple at the core's edge. The moment that the energy barrier dropped, Obi-Wan raced forward to attack.

The enemy was incredibly fast. None of Obi-Wan's training had prepared him to deal with an opponent like this. They hammered and spun at each other relentlessly, moving back and forth along the core's edge. Although Obi-Wan wasn't certain that his Master was dead, he tried to steer his opponent away from the area where Qui-Gon lay motionless on the floor, his lightsaber resting a short distance from his fingertips. Obi-Wan slashed through the handle of his opponent's weapon,

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deactivating one of the blades, but the black-clad figure held tight to his own lightsaber's still-operating half and continued fighting.

Then the foe used the Force to push at Obi-Wan, striking him with such an impact that he released his lightsaber as he tumbled over the edge and into the core. Obi-Wan reached fast to grab a metal protuberance just below the core's upper rim. He was still clinging to the rung when his opponent kicked Obi-Wan's fallen lightsaber into the core. He watched helplessly as his lightsaber fell past him and plunged into the core's depths.

Obi-Wan dangled, his arms straining to maintain a grip. Above him, the demonic figure chopped at the air with his red-bladed lightsaber, taunting and daring Obi-Wan to make one final, desperate move. And then Obi-Wan remembered Qui-Gon's position, and the lightsaber by his side.

Using the Force, Obi-Wan summoned Qui-Gon's lightsaber into the air at the same moment that he kicked at the core's cylindrical wall, launching himself up and out of the core. Obi-Wan caught Qui-Gon's lightsaber and activated it as he sailed over his opponent. The dark figure spun as Obi-Wan landed and swung Qui-Gon's blade, and the creature's evil, tattooed face contorted into an expression of surprise. And then it was the dark figure's turn to tumble into the pit, and as he fell, his neatly cleaved body separated, bounced off the core's walls, and vanished.

Obi-Wan ran to Qui-Gon and carefully elevated his Master's head. Qui-Gon muttered, "No, it—it's too late...."

"No!" Obi-Wan said, his own voice almost a whimper.

"Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon gasped as his eyes locked on his apprentice's face. "Promise—promise me you will train the boy."

"Yes, Master."

Qui-Gon's fingers trembled as he reached up to brush Obi-Wan's cheek, and then he said, "He *is* the Chosen One. He...will bring balance. Train him."

Obi-Wan nodded. His Master closed his eyes and died in his arms.

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Obi-Wan had long known that all apprenticeships, one way or another, eventually came to an end. He knew that Jedi were not immortal, that life was unpredictable, and that death was inevitable. He had even imagined the possibility that he would outlive his older Master. But nothing in his experience or imagination had prepared him for Qui-Gon's last breath, to see the powerful man's life end with such brutal finality.

Obi-Wan lowered his head. He felt stunned and deflated, and uncertain of what to do next. For so many years, he had followed Qui-Gon's lead, but now he was without a Master—and much sooner than he had ever anticipated. He had never felt so alone, as if he had not only lost his closest friend, but his purpose, too. All he could do was try to honor the Jedi who had trained him.

Then he remembered the promise he had made to Qui-Gon.

Obi-Wan realized that his Master had not left him alone, and that he had an entirely new purpose to fulfill.

After becoming separated from the Jedi on Naboo, Anakin Skywalker unintentionally used his temporary hiding space—the cockpit of an N-1 starfighter—to not only engage the Trade Federation invaders but destroy their droid control ship in Naboo's orbit. The loss of the control ship brought a swift end to the battle.

Anakin rejoined Obi-Wan just as a transport from Coruscant arrived at Theed. The former Chancellor Palpatine, who had just been elected Supreme Chancellor, led Yoda and the other members of the Jedi Council in a procession from the landed transport. Stopping before Obi-Wan and Anakin, Palpatine said, "We are indebted to you for your bravery, Obi-Wan Kenobi." Then Palpatine lowered his gaze to Anakin and added, "And you, young Skywalker. We will watch your career with great interest." He clapped the boy on the shoulder, then walked on to confer with Queen Amidala.

Later, as the sun was setting over Theed, Obi-Wan met with Yoda in a chamber at the Queen's palace. The room was lined

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with tall windows that looked out upon skies displaying a wide range of indigo, castle-like clouds. Obi-Wan knelt on the ornately inlaid floor while Yoda, holding a short walking staff, paced back and forth.

Yoda said, “Confer on you, the level of Jedi Knight, the council does.” Stopping to face Obi-Wan, he continued, “But agree with your taking this boy as your Padawan learner...*I do not.*”

“Qui-Gon believed in him,” Obi-Wan said.

Yoda sighed. “The Chosen One, the boy may be. Nevertheless, grave danger I fear in his training.”

“Master Yoda, I gave Qui-Gon my word. I *will* train Anakin.”

“Ohh!” Yoda grunted, then turned and resumed pacing.

“Without the approval of the Council, if I must.”

Facing away from Obi-Wan, Yoda said, “Qui-Gon’s defiance I sense in you. Need that you do not.” He paused, then added, “Agree with you, the Council does.” Turning to face Obi-Wan again, he said, “Your apprentice, Skywalker will be.”

A funeral pyre was prepared for Qui-Gon Jinn on Theed. All the members of the Jedi Council were in attendance, as were Palpatine, Queen Amidala, other dignitaries of Naboo, and the droid R2-D2. Obi-Wan stood beside Anakin, who was unaware of his recent conversation with Yoda. Anakin had believed that Qui-Gon might look after him, and Obi-Wan could tell from the boy’s pained expression that he believed his own future had died with Qui-Gon.

Lifting his gaze to Obi-Wan, Anakin asked, “What will happen to me now?”

Obi-Wan had not changed his belief that the boy was dangerous, but he also knew that Qui-Gon would not have wasted his last words on anything insignificant. If Qui-Gon had believed that Anakin was the Chosen One, then Obi-Wan felt compelled to at least allow the possibility. He had to trust that Qui-Gon had been right about Anakin, that the boy *could* be

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trained, because otherwise...Obi-Wan suddenly realized he couldn't even consider an alternative. *I won't fail Qui-Gon.*

"The Council have granted me permission to train you," Obi-Wan said solemnly. "You *will* be a Jedi. I promise."

And with that, Anakin's fate was sealed.

Chapter Three

Obi-Wan was surprised and annoyed when he didn't find Anakin in his quarters at the Jedi Temple on Coruscant. *He's supposed to be practicing his meditation exercises*, Obi-Wan thought. *Where could he be?*

Several weeks had passed since Obi-Wan had taken Anakin as his Padawan. Although Anakin was mostly eager to please, his impulsive nature frequently tried Obi-Wan's patience. Anakin had been repeatedly instructed not to leave his quarters without first notifying Obi-Wan of his destination, but three Jedi Masters had already found the boy wandering and exploring various area of the Temple. *There are some rules he simply must obey*, Obi-Wan thought. *Why won't he listen to me?*

Outside Anakin's quarters stretched a long corridor with windows that overlooked the megalopolis of Coruscant City. Obi-Wan had walked only a short distance through the corridor when he spied two figures beyond an open doorway, standing on an outdoor balcony and facing away from him. One figure was Anakin. The other was a lean male humanoid, about Obi-Wan's height, who wore a bizarre, head-concealing goggled mask, and a belted tunic over arm and leg wrappings that left no flesh exposed; attached to his belt were two lightsabers.

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As Obi-Wan approached the balcony, he caught Anakin in the middle of asking a stream of questions while the masked figure stood silently, watching the stars emerge over the vast cityscape. “You’re from Tatooine, too?” Anakin said to his unresponsive companion. “Can you understand Basic? You might not believe this, but not too long ago, I actually saved a Tusken Raider’s life! I found him when I was out in the Xelric Draw. He was a bit bigger than you. Maybe he’s a friend of yours? Do you know where the Xelric Draw is? Or maybe your people have another name for it? Did you ever see—?”

Obi-Wan stepped out onto the balcony and said, “Good evening.”

Both Anakin and the masked humanoid turned to face Obi-Wan. Anakin said, “Hello, Obi-Wan—I mean, Master.” Then he exclaimed, “Oh! I’m sorry I didn’t tell you where I was. I just wanted to, uh, stretch my legs, but then I met, um—” Anakin gestured to the masked figure beside him.

Obi-Wan bowed slightly and said, “I am Obi-Wan Kenobi.”

Before the figure could respond, Anakin interjected, “I think he’s a Tusken Raider from Tatooine!” Pointing to the weapons at the Tusken’s belt, Anakin added, “But he’s a Jedi too, like us. Only he has *two* lightsabers.”

Indeed, the quiet figure on the balcony was, by all appearances, a Tusken Raider. Obi-Wan could see his own reflection as he peered into the red lenses of the Tusken Jedi’s goggles. “Please forgive my impetuous Padawan’s manners,” Obi-Wan said. “We welcome you to the Jedi Order, A’Sharad Hett.”

The masked figure bowed back. Anakin looked at Obi-Wan and said, “You know his name?”

Obi-Wan nodded. He had already been briefed about the recent mission of the Jedi Ki-Adi-Mundi, who had been sent to Tatooine to investigate a report of a Tusken Raider who wielded a lightsaber. The “Tusken” was in fact Sharad Hett, a Jedi of almost legendary status who—along with his illustrious

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lightsaber—had mysteriously vanished just over fifteen years earlier. According to Ki-Adi-Mundi, it was by the will of the Force that Sharad Hett wound up on Tatooine, adopted the ways of the Tusken Raiders, lived with them, and ultimately became a tribal leader. He also sired a son, A'Sharad Hett, whom he trained in the ways of the Jedi.

Tragically, during Ki-Adi-Mundi's mission, Sharad Hett was mortally wounded by the bounty hunter Aurra Sing. Sharad Hett's last request was for Ki-Adi-Mundi to take fifteen-year-old A'Sharad back to the Jedi Temple to complete his training.

Obi-Wan said, "Your father was a great Jedi, A'Sharad Hett. Your loss is our loss."

A'Sharad Hett bowed his head in return. Through his breath mask, his reply came out as a low rasp. "Thank you, Master Kenobi."

"He talks!" Anakin said. Obi-Wan glared reproachfully at Anakin, who quickly added, "Sorry. It's just that, well, he hadn't said a word up till now."

"I doubt you let him get a word in edgewise," Obi-Wan said. "And speaking of remaining silent, you should be meditating right now, not bothering A'Sharad Hett."

"The boy does not bother me," A'Sharad rasped in a flat, lifeless tone. "He is from Tatooine. To hear him speak of our homeworld...his perspective...it is interesting."

Obi-Wan smiled at this. "As you were, then," he said. "But just for ten more minutes."

As Obi-Wan left the balcony, he heard Anakin resume speaking. "So, did you ever watch the Podraces? Believe it or not, I won the Boonta Eve Classic! I think some Tusks shot at me during the race, but I'm guessing that wasn't you, right? Hey, did you ever see a krayt dragon...?"

More than fifteen minutes passed before Anakin finally returned to his quarters, where he found Obi-Wan seated in a chair, waiting for him.

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“Sorry I’m late, Master,” Anakin said as his door slid shut behind him. “You know A’Sharad Hett’s teacher, Ki-Adi-Mundi? Well, he came out to talk with us. They’re going on a mission to Malastare! But the reason I’m late is that when Ki-Adi-Mundi found out that I know all about the Podraces on Malastare, he wound up asking me a whole lot of questions about the Phobos Run. That’s the biggest race they have on Malastare, and...”

Obi-Wan remained silent but lifted his eyebrows slightly, waiting for Anakin to finish.

“And...anyway,” Anakin finished, “I just wanted to help.”

“I’m sure Ki-Adi-Mundi appreciated that,” Obi-Wan said. “I also hope you have found a new friend in A’Sharad Hett. He seems to be a very good listener.”

“You can say *that* again.”

Obi-Wan was about to reprimand his Padawan for skipping his meditation exercises when he noticed Anakin’s expression change, a certain sadness about in his eyes. Anakin said, “I was just thinking about A’Sharad Hett, wearing that mask and having all his skin covered up...never being able to touch things with his fingers or feel air against his face. Why would anyone do that?”

“You know more about Tusken than I,” Obi-Wan said, “but I believe it’s simply their tradition.”

“But he’s a Jedi now.”

Obi-Wan shrugged slightly and said, “Then I suppose it’s his choice.”

“Well, I know *I* could never live like that.”

“No one’s asking you to,” Obi-Wan said with a grin. “However,” he continued, more seriously, “I am asking you to keep up with your meditation exercises. They are very important. And so long as it is my duty to train you, so it is your duty to learn from me. Agreed?”

There was a moment of awkward silence, and then Anakin replied, “Yes, Master.”

Obi-Wan wasn’t sure, but he thought he detected a hint of resentment in Anakin’s voice. He hadn’t considered that Anakin,

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because of his experience on Tatooine, might be sensitive to calling anyone *Master*. Obi-Wan sighed, then said, “Please don’t think it gives me pleasure to admonish you, Padawan. I can only imagine what it was like for you to grow up as a slave, and I—”

“Do you ever miss your mother?” Anakin interrupted.

The question caught Obi-Wan off guard, but he recovered fast to answer, “No. No, I don’t. I never knew her, not really. I was still an infant when I arrived here, at the Temple.”

“Then maybe we can make a deal,” Anakin said, and Obi-Wan could tell that the boy was trying to keep his voice from trembling. “You won’t feel sorry for me because I was once a slave, and I won’t feel sorry for you because you don’t miss your mother.”

Again, Obi-Wan was not quite sure how to respond, but he decided it was not the time to discuss the dangers of forming personal attachments that might impair a Jedi’s judgments and actions. Instead, he rose from his seat and said, “You have reminded me, Padawan, that we have much to learn from each other. For now, please trust that I do not feel sorry for you about your past, or for anything else.”

“Then it’s a deal,” Anakin said, extending his hand to Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan still questioned the logic of Anakin’s deal, but smiled as he shook the boy’s hand anyway. “The hour is late,” Obi-Wan said. “Perhaps tomorrow you can tell *me* some Podracing stories.”

Immediately brightening, Anakin said, “Maybe *we* should go to Malastare too!”

“Patience, Padawan,” Obi-Wan said. “Patience.”

Chapter Four

Reflecting on his apprenticeship with Qui-Gon Jinn, Obi-Wan Kenobi knew that he had not always been the most obedient student. In fact, he had even been occasionally foolhardy. Now, ten years after Obi-Wan had begun training Anakin Skywalker, he appreciated Qui-Gon as a teacher even more. As stubborn and independent as Qui-Gon had been regarding the Jedi Code, he also had been patient and generous, two attributes that Obi-Wan found himself increasingly lacking.

Sometimes, it seemed difficult to teach Anakin anything. He had recently turned twenty, and despite Obi-Wan's training, Anakin still let his emotions—especially fear and anger—get the better of him. The faintest praise could make him beam with pride, while the slightest criticism would make him petulant and resentful. Obi-Wan was even more concerned when Anakin confided that he had been having nightmares about his mother dying on Tatooine.

More than once, Obi-Wan mused, *If only Anakin had begun his training as an infant.*

It didn't help that every Jedi at the Temple was aware of Qui-Gon's assertion that Anakin was the Chosen One of prophecy. This made Anakin the focus of more scrutiny than any other Padawan in recent history. Although Anakin never claimed to be

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the Chosen One, it helped even less that he appeared to enjoy the attention he received because of his association with the prophecy. Ever since the Battle of Naboo, even Supreme Chancellor Palpatine had taken a strong interest in the boy.

Initially, Obi-Wan considered training Anakin as his debt to Qui-Gon. However, over the course of time and numerous missions, Obi-Wan came to regard Anakin as something more than his own personal responsibility. Anakin—impossible as he could be—had become Obi-Wan’s friend.

After a mission to Ansion, Obi-Wan and Anakin had just returned to Coruscant when the Jedi Council instructed them to proceed to a high-security Senate apartment building. There, they were scheduled to meet with a Galactic Senator who had recently survived an assassination attempt that had left six others dead. Their assignment was to serve as guards to protect the Senator.

As a lift carried the two Jedi to the skyscraper’s uppermost floors, Obi-Wan noticed that his tall apprentice was nervously fidgeting. Obi-Wan said, “You seem a little on edge.”

“Not at all,” Anakin said as he smoothed out his long Jedi robes.

Unconvinced, Obi-Wan said, “I haven’t felt you this tense since we fell into that nest of gundarks.”

Anakin scoffed, “*You* fell into that nightmare, Master, and I rescued you, remember?”

“Oh...yes,” Obi-Wan replied, and then he chuckled at the memory. Anakin laughed too, but Obi-Wan sensed that his apprentice’s anxiety was increasing as they ascended the skyscraper. “You’re sweating,” Obi-Wan observed. “Relax. Take a deep breath.”

“I haven’t seen her in ten years, Master.”

Obi-Wan grinned and shook his head. The Galactic Senator whom they had been instructed to protect was Padmé Amidala, the former Queen of Naboo. Amidala had been in her teens when she had been elected Queen, and was only a few years

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older than Anakin. Obi-Wan was aware that Anakin had maintained something of a crush on Amidala for the past decade, and could not help finding some amusement in seeing his apprentice looking so jumpy.

When the lift doors slid open, they were greeted by their old friend Jar Jar Binks, a lanky Gungan they had met just before the Battle of Naboo. Because Obi-Wan now wore a beard and Anakin had grown considerably taller, Jar Jar did not recognize the Jedi at first, but then he locked onto Obi-Wan's eyes and said, "Obi? Obi! Mesa so smilen to seein yousa!"

"Good to see you again, Jar Jar."

Jar Jar turned and called out, "Senator Padmé! Mesa palos here! Lookie, lookie, Senator. Desa Jedi arriven."

Obi-Wan and Anakin followed Jar Jar into a luxurious suite, where they were greeted by Padmé and two of her aides. "It's a great pleasure to see you again, milady," Obi-Wan said as he shook Padmé's hand.

"It has been far too long, Master Kenobi," Padmé replied. And then she lifted her gaze to the tall young man beside Obi-Wan. "Ani?" she said with obvious delight. "My goodness, you've grown."

"So have you," Anakin said sheepishly, then hastily added, "Grown more beautiful, I mean."

Obi-Wan glanced at his awkward apprentice, whose gaze was hopelessly locked onto Padmé's eyes. Anakin continued, "Well, f-for a Senator, I mean."

Padmé laughed. "Ani, you'll always be that little boy I knew on Tatooine."

As the group proceeded to discuss the recent attempt on Padmé's life, Anakin was hardly cooperative. Although he and Obi-Wan had been instructed merely to protect Padmé, he openly promised to find the assassins who had tried to kill her. When Anakin questioned the logic of the Jedi Council's directives to watch over Padmé, Obi-Wan was compelled to

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reprimand his apprentice before the group, which prompted Anakin to glower.

He's not thinking like a Jedi, Obi-Wan thought ruefully. He's letting his emotions interfere with our assignment.

Obi-Wan wondered if the Jedi Council had made a mistake when they had assigned him and Anakin to protect Padmé, but then it hadn't been entirely the Council's decision. It had been Supreme Chancellor Palpatine's idea.

In recent months, numerous former-member worlds of the Republic had allied with the Separatist movement. The Separatists were led by a former Jedi, the charismatic Count Dooku. Dooku expounded that the Galactic Senate was corrupt beyond repair, and promised a new unified government throughout the galaxy. Because many Senators from the remaining Republic worlds believed they would soon be vulnerable to the Separatists, they endorsed the creation of an army to defend the Republic. The reason that Padmé Amidala had traveled to Coruscant was to cast her vote against the Military Creation Act because she knew that the formation of an army would almost certainly lead to civil war.

R2-D2 had remained with Padmé since the Battle of Naboo, and the astromech droid had accompanied her to Coruscant. As events turned out, R2-D2's presence in Padmé's suite was most fortunate, for while Obi-Wan and Anakin argued about their orders and the best way to protect Padmé, it was the R2-D2 who alerted them that the suite had been infiltrated.

A mysterious assassin had released a pair of small, deadly arthropods into Padmé's bedroom. Using his lightsaber, Anakin swiftly killed the creatures, and then both he and Obi-Wan raced out into the night to pursue the assassin.

The Jedi became separated and Anakin dropped his lightsaber during the dizzying, perilous chase that carried them across and through multiple levels of Galactic City. Obi-Wan was able to recover his apprentice's weapon, and caught up with Anakin

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outside a gambling club called the Outlander. Pointing into the Outlander's wide, brightly illuminated doorway, Anakin said, "She went into the club, Master."

"Patience," Obi-Wan said. "Use the Force. Think."

"Sorry, Master."

"He went in there to hide, not to run."

"Yes, Master."

Obi-Wan held up Anakin's lightsaber and said, "Next time, try not to lose it."

"Yes, Master."

"This weapon is your life."

Anakin took the weapon and said, "I try, Master."

As Anakin followed him into the Outlander, Obi-Wan muttered, "Why do I get the feeling you're going to be the death of me?"

"Don't say that, Master. You're the closest thing I have to a father."

Anakin's words did not make Obi-Wan sympathetic. Without breaking his stride into the crowded club, he said, "Then why don't you listen to me?"

"I am trying."

They stopped to survey the crowd. The patrons were talking and drinking, gambling and playing hologames. Obi-Wan asked, "Can you see him?"

"I think *he* is a *she*, and I think she is a changeling."

"In that case, be extra careful." Then Obi-Wan tilted his head to Anakin and added, "Go and find her."

"Where are *you* going, Master?"

"For a drink," Obi-Wan replied. Leaving Anakin, he stepped over to the bar and signaled the bartender. A moment later, the bartender placed a small glass filled with luminescent blue liquid in front of Obi-Wan, who said, "Thank you."

A young humanoid, a Balosar with flexible antenepalps that extended from his stylishly filthy hair, edged up beside Obi-Wan and rapidly stammered, "You wanna buy some death sticks?"

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To any respectable person, the Balosar would have been an annoyance. To Obi-Wan, he was only a slight distraction, but hardly a welcome one. Obi-Wan did not want to endanger the Balosar by allowing him to remain by his side, nor encourage him to peddle his wares elsewhere. Obi-Wan kept his eyes forward, but made a slight gesture with his right hand as he replied, "You don't want to sell me death sticks."

The Balosar was unaware that Obi-Wan was manipulating his mind. He looked slightly confused, then thoughtful as he answered, "I don't want to sell you death sticks."

"You want to go home and rethink your life."

"I want to go home and rethink my life." The Balosar stepped away from the bar, leaving his unfinished drink behind. As he walked away, Obi-Wan's eyes flicked over the patrons in front of him, and left his back exposed. He did this deliberately. *Let her think I can't see her coming.*

Despite the noise, the crowd, the lights, the strange mix of smells in the air, and every other distraction, Obi-Wan sensed the danger that approached him from behind. He drew his lightsaber and activated its blade as he spun, neatly cleaving through the assassin's right arm before she even had the chance to fire her blaster. Her forearm, still holding the blaster, sailed to the floor as she cried out and fell back against the game table.

Anakin moved fast to Obi-Wan's side and leveled his gaze at the astonished patrons. "Easy," he said. "Jedi business. Go back to your drinks."

The assassin wore a visored helmet and a dark violet form-fitting bodysuit with a flexible armorweave jerkin. She appeared to be a human female. Anakin opened a back door that led to an alley and Obi-Wan hauled her through the doorway and outside. Anakin glanced up and down the alley as Obi-Wan eased the woman's body onto the hard ground. Obi-Wan asked, "Do you know who it was you were trying to kill?"

The woman groaned, then said, "It was a Senator from Naboo."

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“And who hired you?”

“It was just a job.”

Anakin leaned down and said in a gentle, soothing tone, “Who hired you? Tell us.” But when the woman did not immediately reply, Anakin’s face contorted with anger and he snarled, “Tell us now!”

She said, “It was a bounty hunter called—”

Before she could finish, a small, dart-like projectile buried itself suddenly into her neck. Obi-Wan and Anakin turned their heads to gaze up in the direction of the projectile’s trajectory. They saw an armored figure, a man wearing a jetpack, launching up and away from a distant rooftop before he vanished into the night sky of the city.

The bounty hunter?

Obi-Wan returned his gaze to the woman he held, and saw that Anakin was right: she wasn’t human. She was a changeling, a shape-shifting Clawdite. Her face reverted to its relaxed state, revealing somewhat lumpy, heavily scarred features. She gasped, “Wee shahnit...sleemo.” Her wide, heavy-lidded eyes fell closed and she died in Obi-Wan’s arms.

Obi-Wan pulled the projectile from her neck and held it out so Anakin could examine it, too. It was a nasty piece of work, an injector-needle tip with stabilizing fins for long-range shots and embedding prongs to anchor into the target. “Toxic dart,” Obi-Wan said. He looked back toward the distant rooftop that had served as a launch pad for the Clawdite’s killer, and he thought, *He could have shot us, too—if he’d wanted.*

Obi-Wan turned to Anakin and said, “Her last words. Did you understand them?”

“She spoke in Huttese,” Anakin said. “She said, ‘Bounty hunter slimeball.’”

Obi-Wan had no idea of the armored bounty hunter’s identity, but he did not question the fact that the man was very, very dangerous.

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Obi-Wan was not surprised when the Jedi Council instructed him to track down the bounty hunter and identify his employers. However, their decision to have Anakin escort Senator Amidala back to her homeworld, for her own safety, did cause him some concern. It would be Anakin's first assignment without his Master, and despite all of his abilities, he was also arrogant, and Obi-Wan didn't think he was ready. But the Council was confident in their decision, and Obi-Wan personally escorted Anakin, Padmé, and R2-D2 to the Coruscant spaceport and waiting freighter that would take them to Naboo.

Obi-Wan began his investigation by trying to identify the toxic dart that he had removed from the Clawdite's neck. After the analysis droids in the Jedi Archives failed to provide any useful information about the dart, he realized he would have to consult a different sort of expert.

Obi-Wan had kept in touch with Dexter Jettster over the years, and he was fortunate in that he did not have to go far to find the well-traveled Besalisk. Dexter was currently the proprietor and head cook at Dex's Diner in CoCo Town, a commercial district in the upper levels of Galactic City on Coruscant. Dexter greeted his old friend with a big hug. After they settled down in a diner booth that looked out on a busy street, Obi-Wan placed the dart on the table in front of Dexter.

"Well, whattaya know!" Dexter exclaimed as he picked up the dart. "I ain't seen one of these since I was prospectin' on Subterrel, beyond the Outer Rim."

"Can you tell me where it came from?"

"This baby belongs to them cloners. What you got here is a Kamino saberdart."

Obi-Wan had always been amazed by Dexter's powers of observation as well as his keen memory. He said, "I wonder why it didn't show up in the analysis archives."

Brushing his thick fingers along the dart's stabilizing fins, Dexter said, "It's these funny little cuts on the side that give it away. Those analysis droids only focus on symbols. Huh! I

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should think that you Jedi would have more respect for the difference between knowledge and..." Dexter chuckled before he finished, "...wisdom."

Obi-Wan grinned and replied, "Well, if droids could think, there'd be none of us here, would there?" Taking the dart back from Dexter, he continued, "Kamino. I'm not familiar with it. Is it in the Republic?"

"No, no. It's beyond the Outer Rim. I'd say about, uh, twelve parsecs, outside the Rishi Maze. Should be easy to find. Even for those droids in your archives."

But Dexter was wrong about Kamino being easy to find. After Obi-Wan left Dex's Diner, he returned to the Jedi Archives and quickly ascertained that there were no records for Kamino at all. However, when he examined holographic star charts to find the location that Dexter had described, he did detect an apparently invisible source of gravity where a solar system *should* have been.

But solar systems don't just disappear. What happened to it?

Obi-Wan decided to consult Yoda. He found Yoda teaching a class of young Jedi initiates. They were learning how to use the Force, testing their developing skills with lightsabers against hovering remotes. After Obi-Wan explained his dilemma about the missing solar system and planet to Yoda, Yoda encouraged him to display the holographic star chart on a map reader for the entire class to see.

Obi-Wan placed a small, silver ball on the map reader, and a three-dimensional view of hundreds of stars filled the central area of the room. He pointed out the approximate location of the missing solar system. Yoda said, "Hmm. Gravity's silhouette remains, but the star and all the planets...disappeared they have." Facing his students, he asked, "How can this be? Hmm?"

It was one of Yoda's pupils, a little boy, who answered. "Master? Because someone erased it from the archive memory."

Obi-Wan smiled. The boy had arrived at the most logical solution, but it was one that Obi-Wan hadn't even entertained.

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Only a Jedi could have erased the memory. Who would have done such a thing? And why?

Obi-Wan used a Delta-7 starfighter to travel to the “missing” solar system, where he found the waterworld of Kamino. He landed his starfighter on a rain-spattered platform close to the administrative center of Tipoca City, a cluster of enormous domed structures that were elevated by massive stilts above the constantly stormy sea.

The Kaminoans were long-necked amphibians. Obi-Wan was surprised when he was told that Kamino’s prime minister, Lama Su, had been expecting a Jedi to arrive. He was led to Lama Su, who revealed that ten years earlier, the Jedi Master Sifo-Dyas had commissioned the Kaminoans to produce, train, and outfit a clone army for the Republic. According to Lama Su, the Kaminoans had been waiting for the Jedi to take delivery of Sifo-Dyas’s order ever since.

Obi-Wan found this information baffling. He recalled that Sifo-Dyas had been killed almost a decade ago, and could not imagine why Sifo-Dyas or any other Jedi would have made such an arrangement with the Kaminoans. *Even if Sifo-Dyas had anticipated the threat of the Separatist movement, he certainly didn’t have the resources to finance a clone army!* But Obi-Wan also sensed it was best to play along for the time being, and pretended that he had indeed arrived on Kamino to inspect the clones.

As Lama Su guided Obi-Wan on a tour of the vast, multi-level cloning facility, Obi-Wan saw thousands of clones. All of them appeared to be identical dark-haired human males, at various stages of growth up through age twenty. Lama Su explained that growth acceleration allowed the clones to mature faster while genetic modifications made them less independent than the original host, the man who had served as the clones’ template.

“And who was the original host?” Obi-Wan asked.

“A bounty hunter called Jango Fett,” Lama Su replied.

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Believing that he was closing in on the man who'd fired the saberdart on Coruscant, Obi-Wan asked casually, "And where is this bounty hunter now?"

"Oh, we keep him here."

Obi-Wan readily accepted the offer to meet Jango Fett. Although he knew it was highly probable that Fett was the same bounty hunter behind the attempted assassinations on Coruscant, he did not believe he would require any reinforcements.

A few standard days after his first encounter with Jango Fett, and many light-years away from Kamino, Obi-Wan found himself suspended in the air, trapped within a force field chamber of a droid factory on the planet Geonosis. He thought, *Now would be a good time for some reinforcements to arrive!*

On Kamino, Obi-Wan had met Jango Fett as well as the man's "son," an unmodified ten-year-old clone named Boba. Obi-Wan had quickly determined that Fett was indeed the armored bounty hunter he'd seen on Coruscant, but had been unable to stop the Fetts from escaping Kamino. Fortunately, he had secured a tracer beacon onto Fett's starship, a Kuat Systems *Firespray*-class interceptor, which enabled him to follow the ship to Geonosis.

A red, rocky planet ringed by asteroids, Geonosis was inhabited by the semi-insectoid Geonosians. Obi-Wan had stealthily infiltrated a towering Geonosian hive to discover the Separatist leader Count Dooku engaged in a secret meeting with officials from various worlds. He learned that the Neimoidian Trade Federation was behind the assassination attempts on Padmé Amidala, and that the Commerce Guilds and the Corporate Alliance had pledged their armies to Dooku. He had also learned that the Trade Federation would soon take delivery of a massive droid army from a Geonosian factory. He had even managed to send a transmission with most of this information to Anakin, who—for reasons unknown to Obi-Wan—had left Naboo and gone to Tatooine.

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But then Obi-Wan had been attacked by droids and was captured.

Now, suspended in a force field with energy binders wrapped around his wrists and ankles, Obi-Wan wondered if Anakin had managed to relay his transmission to the Jedi Council. As he hung in the air of the hive chamber, all he could do was wait.

Little did he know that within a few short hours, the Jedi would arrive with clone troops from Kamino, and the Clone Wars would begin.

Interlude

Ben Kenobi had told Luke Skywalker that he had served with Luke's father, Anakin, during the Clone Wars, so when Luke finally found an entry about the Clone Wars in Ben's journal, he became so excited he almost forgot about the furnace he had set up inside Ben's hut. He was using the furnace to create the gem for his new lightsaber, and really couldn't hurry the process, so he had been reading Ben's journal while waiting for the furnace to reach its full temperature.

Luke's knowledge of the Clone Wars was relatively limited. Most of the "facts" came from old datatapes, but only those that had been authorized by the Empire. Still, he knew that the Jedi Knights had led clone armies on behalf of the Galactic Republic against the Confederacy of Independent Systems. In the end, the Confederacy lost, the Jedi were accused of attempting to take over the Republic, and the Republic's leader, Palpatine, was proclaimed Emperor. According to Ben, it was Darth Vader who helped the Empire hunt down and destroy the Jedi.

After checking the furnace, Luke returned his attention to the journal and the entry he had found, and started reading it from the beginning. Ben had made a notation that indicated the entry was almost twenty years old.

Officially, the Clone Wars began at the Battle of Geonosis, for it was there that the Jedi Knights first utilized the clone troops that had been commissioned to fight on behalf of the Republic

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against the Separatists' droid militia. Although the Separatists were defeated at Geonosis, they quickly regrouped as the Confederacy of Independent Systems. The galaxy plunged into a civil war that would last over three terrible years.

My fellow Jedi and I were conscripted as generals for the Grand Army of the Republic. Like the worlds of the Republic, the Jedi were also soon divided, as some refused to fight and abandoned the Jedi Order.

Unofficially, the Clone Wars began at least ten years before the Battle of Geonosis, when—I eventually realized—the Sith Lords began taking measures to ensure that the Republic would one day have reason to require an army. The Sith Lords engineered every aspect of the Clone Wars, controlling both the Republic and the Confederacy and pitting them against each other, all in an effort to annihilate the Republic and the Jedi Order and claim galactic conquest.

If my words sound like the ravings of a paranoid, crazy hermit, consider the fact that the Sith Lord Darth Vader serves the Emperor, and the Jedi are all but gone.

Luke was disappointed that the entry ended there. While he set the book aside and checked on the furnace again, he wondered why Ben hadn't written more about the Clone Wars. It never occurred to him that Ben might have sometimes wished he couldn't remember the Clone Wars at all.

Chapter Five

Clone Commander Cody shouted, “Incoming!”

Jedi General Obi-Wan Kenobi already heard the deadly crescendo of approaching missiles. His division of the Republic Grand Army, the 7th Sky Corps, had just gained ground at a public park in a city square. They were on Farquar III, a planet that had recently allied with the Confederacy of Independent Systems.

Cody’s helmeted head turned to see Obi-Wan’s hand signal: right hand extended, two fingers aimed at the sky, followed by a swift chop in the direction from which the missiles were fired.

Cody swung his gaze up at the armored clone troopers who were positioned on the wide roof of the building behind him and Kenobi. Holding his blaster rifle in his right hand, Cody signaled with his left to the anti-missile unit to train their laser cannons at the incoming missiles, and then directed a second unit to target and fire at their attackers.

The first unit calculated the speed and approach of the missiles as they raised their cannons. The second unit did the same as they bounced a signal off two airborne Republic dropships to pinpoint their enemy’s position.

The incoming missiles—seven total—entered visual range. Both of Kenobi’s anti-missile units fired at their respective

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targets. A moment later there were five simultaneous explosions overhead. The first unit had missed two missiles.

Obi-Wan dived for cover behind a statue of a poet he had never heard of and threw his gloved hands over his ears. One of the enemy missiles took out Obi-Wan's second anti-missile unit, while the other missile struck an adjacent apartment building. Fragments of missiles, ferrocrete, and clone armor sprayed past Obi-Wan's position.

Uncovering his ears and springing to his feet, Obi-Wan heard a ripple of distant explosions, and hoped his now-decimated second unit had hit their enemy target. Turning to Cody, he shouted, "Status!"

"Scored and burned!" Cody shouted back, but before Obi-Wan could issue his next command, a squad of battle droids marched out of an alley and lurched toward the park. Obi-Wan activated his lightsaber. The droids opened fire, launching a hail of crimson energy bolts into the city square where the 7th Sky Corps had landed less than three minutes earlier.

The Republic's objective was to destroy a Trade Federation-financed droid factory. Unfortunately, the Confederacy had somehow anticipated the Republic Army's arrival. Even worse, during their descent to Farquar III, Obi-Wan had become separated from Anakin as well as Jedi General T'Teknulp, who led their reinforcements.

Obi-Wan leapt away from the statue, rolled across a plot of rubble, and came up standing to swing his lightsaber at the fired energy bolts. His blade became nothing more than a blur as he batted away, smacking the bolts back at the approaching droids, cutting them down with their own barrage. But another squad of droids was close behind, marching forward from the same alley.

Obi-Wan thought, not for the first time, *Where are Anakin and T'Teknulp?!*

"Sir!" Cody cried out from behind, jolting Obi-Wan's attention back to the latest round of battle droids, just as they opened fire. Again, Obi-Wan's blade swept and smacked at the

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energy bolts, sending them back at the droids. He was still swinging at the bolts when six large wheel-like droids rolled out from the alley and spun toward Obi-Wan's position.

Droidekas!

Bouncing over rubble and the remains of the fallen battle droids, the droidekas whipped around to arrange themselves in a circular formation on the ground, then rapidly transformed, activating their spherical deflector shields as they unfolded their double-barreled blaster-cannon arms and dug their tripod foot claws into the street.

The droidekas opened fire into the square. Knowing that neither his lightsaber nor blaster bolts would penetrate the droids' shields, Obi-Wan swung at the incoming bolts, batting them so that they exploded into the ground at the droids' perimeter. The clone troops followed their general's lead, training their DC-15 blaster rifles at the areas of ground around and between the droidekas. The clone troops maintained fire, hammering at the ground as crimson laser bolts whizzed past them and glanced off their armor, while on the roof behind them, the surviving anti-missile unit reloaded their cannons and waited for their general's order.

Obi-Wan hoped to blast the ground out from under the droids and send them crashing below street level. Over the roar of blasters, he angled his arm to the anti-missile team and shouted "Fire!"

Responding with hair-trigger efficiency, the anti-missile team fired their cannons. Four missiles streaked down between the droidekas. The missiles detonated on impact, but instead of tearing a wide hole in the ground, the explosion merely sent ferrocrete flying and knocked the shielded droids away from each other. Launched off their feet but safely contained within their spherical shields, the droids rebounded off the walls of the surrounding buildings like toy bouncing balls, only to roll back to the scorched, battered surface of the street and reassume their deadly circle. The droidekas began firing again.

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That didn't go well!

Two clone troopers were hit and went down on either side of Obi-Wan. Wondering what had become of Anakin and their reinforcements, Obi-Wan snapped the comlink from his belt as he ducked behind a wide pylon at the park's entrance gate. He used the established code names for the mission as he said into the comlink, "Kay Six to Tee Eight! Kay Six to Tee Eight!"

"Tee Eight here!" a strangely jovial and high, squeaking voice answered from the comlink. It was General T'Teknulp, a Chadra-Fan Jedi, who always sounded happy no matter what the circumstances. T'Teknulp continued, "Wild greeting! See you in minus five! Tee Eight out!"

Obi-Wan flicked off his comlink. *Wild greeting* meant T'Teknulp's division had encountered enemy forces in planetary orbit, but Obi-Wan couldn't worry too much about that. T'Teknulp had dealt with more than a few *wild greetings* in recent weeks, and had not once been injured. If T'Teknulp said he would be at Obi-Wan's position in less than five minutes, as he had indicated via the comlink, then Obi-Wan trusted T'Teknulp would arrive within five minutes. What worried Obi-Wan was that he doubted his own division could survive for even *one* more minute.

And then he glanced up and saw Anakin.

Anakin was standing in the open hatch of a Republic gunship that was coming in low and fast from the south. Smoke billowed out from the gunship's left stabilizer. *His ship has been hit!* Another enemy missile suddenly appeared in the sky, traveling fast from the city's business district. Obi-Wan's eyes went wide as the missile struck the side of Anakin's gunship.

"Anakin!"

The gunship erupted but Anakin had already leapt away from it. As the shattered gunship spiraled downward, Obi-Wan kept his eyes on his apprentice, watching Anakin's form as he rotated in midair, activated his own lightsaber, and landed on his feet on the roof of a building that adjoined a theater. The ruptured

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gunship fell sideways and crashed onto a water fountain, killing the vehicle's clone pilot instantly. A split-second after the crash, the gunship exploded, and the power of the blast nearly knocked Obi-Wan off his feet.

The droidekas hit two more clone troopers. Obi-Wan was planning his next move when he saw Anakin run and leap from his landing point to the rooftop of the neighboring theater.

An immense, eight-meter-wide octagonal marquee was affixed to the theater's outer wall above the main entrance, which overlooked the droidekas. As Anakin jumped over the edge of the roof with his lightsaber extended, Obi-Wan—once again batting at the droidekas' fired bolts—realized that Anakin was going for the marquee's structural supports.

Three more clone troopers went down.

Obi-Wan moved quickly. Darting away from his position, he ran fast, weaving back and forth across the park, drawing the droidekas' fire. Lightsaber extended, he continued batting at the energy bolts as he ran, but now, his only intention was to keep the droids occupied and distract them from Anakin's action outside the theater.

Anakin had landed on a window ledge. He gripped his lightsaber in his right hand, and Obi-Wan was glad for the fact that his apprentice had adjusted so well to the prosthetic that had replaced the right arm he'd lost to Count Dooku on Geonosis. Balancing on the ledge, Anakin brought his blade through two of the marquee's thick plastoid anchors. There was an ugly cracking sound as the enormous marquee tilted away from the building. Anakin leapt fast for another ledge and repeated the action with his lightsaber on more anchors. The marquee began to fall to the street below.

The droidekas were still firing at Obi-Wan when the marquee came crashing down on top of them. Although the droids' deflector shields were invulnerable to energy weapons, they could not repel the crushing force of the heavy marquee. The six droids were smashed flat. At the moment of impact, the clone troops

Ryder Windham

stopped firing. Except for the whooshing sound of the fires that burned amidst the wreckage in the city square, the area was silent.

Anakin scrambled down the side of the theater and landed on top of the fallen marquee just as Obi-Wan arrived beside him. Both had deactivated their lightsabers. Catching his breath, Obi-Wan said, "Well done, Padawan."

Anakin gestured to the marquee beneath them and said, "I'd say it was a smashing performance."

Despite all the destruction and carnage, Obi-Wan couldn't help grinning. But he wagged a finger in mock reproach and said, "Points off for puns."

Anakin scanned the area and said, "Where's T'Teknulp? He was right behind my gunship."

"He had a 'wild greeting,' but he's on his way." Seeing Commander Cody approach, Obi-Wan said, "Cody, inform General T'Teknulp he needn't hurry on our account."

Cody removed his helmet. By now, Obi-Wan was so familiar with Cody that he no longer thought anything of the fact that the clone's features were identical to Jango Fett's. Cody replied, "Sorry, sir. Just received word from the fleet. General T'Teknulp and his division didn't make it."

Obi-Wan was stunned. He lowered his gaze to the ground, then looked up to face Anakin, who was equally staggered by Cody's report. Anakin shook his head and said, "He...T'Teknulp...he was right behind me."

Cody's eyes flicked from Anakin back to Obi-Wan, then he said, "Orders, sir?"

Obi-Wan thought of all the Jedi who had already died since the Battle of Geonosis. He hoped it wouldn't be long before he and Anakin tracked down Count Dooku and General Grievous, who always seemed three steps ahead of the Jedi.

"Let's get moving," Obi-Wan answered grimly. "We have a droid factory to blow up."

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During the Clone Wars, Obi-Wan noticed that Anakin was becoming more focused as a Jedi. One reason for Anakin's change in behavior was that he no longer suffered from nightmares about his mother dying. However, the reason for this was most tragic.

Just before the Battle of Geonosis, Anakin's recurring nightmares had prompted him to disobey orders and travel with Padmé Amidala from Naboo to Tatooine. On the sand planet, Anakin learned that his mother had been freed from her Toydarian owner several years earlier, and that she had married a moisture farmer named Cliegg Lars. The farmer and his family informed Anakin that Shmi had been abducted by the violent, nomadic Tusken Raiders.

Anakin had been unable to save his mother, but recovered her dead body from the Tusken Raiders' camp and buried her at the Lars homestead. When he left Tatooine, he took C-3PO, a protocol droid that he had constructed in childhood.

Although Obi-Wan had never really known his own family, he did have sympathy for Anakin's loss. And as Anakin's powers grew stronger, Obi-Wan began to believe that his Padawan may have been transformed by the tragedy for the better.

Interlude

Reading Ben Kenobi's journal, Luke Skywalker found another entry that mentioned the Clone Wars. It also mentioned Anakin Skywalker and Darth Vader. Ben had written the entry after the shorter one about the Clone Wars.

Two days ago, on one of my walks, I came across the twisted, withered husk of a short desert plant that had grown in the shadows of a dusty rock formation. Yesterday, I passed the same plant again and noticed it had flowered small white petals, flecked with dark grey. This morning, I was surprised to find the entire plant had vanished. Even though I knew some creature had probably eaten it, I felt a sense of loss that surprised me. And I thought of Asajj Ventress.

I've already written instructions for how to build a lightsaber. Now, I find myself compelled to write something of the enemies who use them.

From what I remember from the history databooks, the Sith have wielded lightsabers for at least four thousand years. They were long believed to have been extinct until just sixteen years ago, when my Master and I duelled with an Iridonian Zabrak who used a double-bladed lightsaber. This Sith killed my Master, and then I killed him in self-defense.

Ryder Windham

Ten years later, my apprentice Anakin Skywalker and I dueled Count Dooku at the Battle of Geonosis. The leader of the Separatist movement, Dooku was a former Jedi Master who—we realized too late—had turned to the dark side. This was most unfortunate, not only because Dooku had been a revered Jedi, but also because he was a master swordsman. Dooku escaped at the Battle of Geonosis, but not before he informed me that a Sith Lord was manipulating the Galactic Senate. Three devastating years later—after Anakin defeated Dooku in orbit above Coruscant—I would learn that he was telling the truth. The Sith Lord was Supreme Chancellor Palpatine.

Soon after the Battle of Geonosis, Anakin and I had our first encounter with Asajj Ventress. She was a humanoid, hairless with pale skin, who wielded two lightsabers simultaneously. These lightsabers could also be joined at the handles to create a double-bladed weapon. Before she attacked, she told me that she had emerged from misery and suffering, only to find the Jedi she had once worshipped were nothing but “weak, misguided fools.” She added that she agreed with Count Dooku, that the galaxy was in need of a Jedi purge.

Asajj Ventress escaped that day, but not before she killed one Jedi and maimed his apprentice. It was obvious by her technique that she had received training from Dooku. Over the course of the Clone Wars, Anakin and I had faced off against Ventress on other worlds. But despite all her fury and murderous inclinations, I always sensed something within her that distinguished her from the Sith Lords: an underlying fear. Mostly, it was a fear of being alone. And I sensed that there was some good in her, some part that had not been corrupted by Dooku. Where the Sith Lords were unquestionably evil, Ventress was simply a slave to the dark side.

She wasn't the only one. General Grievous —another of Dooku's disciples in lightsaber combat — was in command of the Confederacy's droid armies. Grievous was a cyborg who had killed a number of Jedi and taken their lightsabers as trophies. He

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was capable of wielding four lightsabers simultaneously. All in all, a most unpleasant fellow. I defeated him on Utapau.

And then the Purge began. I would soon learn that I was among the few Jedi to survive, and that Palpatine had taken a new apprentice: my former student, Darth Vader. And because of Darth Vader, Anakin was gone as well.

Eventually, I learned some details of Ventress's history. She was born on Rattaka, an Outer Rim world, so remote that it was unknown to the Republic. She was still a child when her parents were killed by one of the many local warlords. After a Jedi named Ky Narec became stranded on Rattaka, he found the orphaned Ventress and realized she was Force-sensitive. Narec trained Ventress as his apprentice, and apparently trained her relatively well, for together they defeated many criminals. Tragically, a group of warlords killed Narec, and rather than honoring the ways of the Jedi, Ventress sought vengeance. And once again, she was alone. Is it any wonder that she developed such a supreme hatred for the Jedi Order that "abandoned" her Master?

In hindsight, Vader and Ventress had some similar characteristics. Both knew of the loss of loved ones, and had reason to distrust the Republic and the Jedi Order. But when I finally caught up with Vader, I sensed nothing but pure evil about him. For unlike Ventress, Vader was not a victim of unfortunate circumstances. Yes, he had his struggles and his shortcomings, but he was not a weak being who feared abandonment. He was a powerful man who had been given opportunities to better himself, yet he only craved more power, and chose his own path to betray the Jedi and become a Sith. He was my greatest failure.

My duel with Vader was awful in its savagery. In the end, he was more determined to kill me than defend himself, and was blind with fury when I felled him. I left him maimed and burning on the shores of a lava river. To have dealt him a killing blow might have been the merciful thing to do, but I had no mercy for Vader.

Ryder Windham

Because I am a Jedi, not a coldblooded murderer, all I could do was leave Vader to his fate. Had I killed then and there, I believe I would have taken a step onto the same dark path that he had found so impossible to resist. But by leaving him for dead, I fear I failed yet again, for I soon learned that Vader had survived, in a fashion. Like the late General Grievous, he is mostly machine now, a malevolent construct of pistons and gears, plastoid and wires, his mortal remains fueled by the dark side. The galaxy will never know peace until Darth Vader and the Emperor breathe their last.

It is hard for me to see what the future holds. Fortunately, I have my mission and my ongoing studies of the Force to help me be mindful of the present, as well as the daily rigors of survival on Tatooine. Whatever tomorrow may bring, I must be ready for it.

By the time Luke reached the end of the entry, he realized he'd been holding his breath for over a minute. Exhaling slowly, he returned to the beginning, scanning the text to see if he had missed something. He had never heard of Asaji Ventress, Count Dooku, an Iridonian Zabrak, or any of the battles that Ben had mentioned. But these revelations barely even registered—Luke was frustrated that Ben hadn't written more about Anakin and Vader.

He reread aloud the two lines that had especially commanded his attention: "...Palpatine had taken a new apprentice: my former student, Darth Vader. And because of Darth Vader, Anakin was gone as well."

The words sounded hollow in his mouth. Although Ben had not written in so many words that Darth Vader had killed Anakin, that was what Ben had told him had happened. He wondered just how carefully Ben had chosen his words when he had written that Anakin was gone.

And then he read again about how Ben—or rather Obi-Wan—had left Vader to die.

Luke had no illusions that Darth Vader was a killer. Vader had also tortured both Princess Leia and Han Solo on different occasions. On Cloud City, Vader had maimed Luke before inviting him to join the dark side and

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help him overthrow the Emperor. But despite all the horrible things Vader had done, and despite the fact that Ben had no mercy for Vader, Luke was surprised that he felt something other than horror or anger at the thought of the armored Dark Lord of the Sith.

I feel sorry for him.

As the phantom pain chewed at his right wrist, Luke wondered what exactly had happened all those years ago on an unidentified world, along the shores of a lava river.

Chapter Six

“It’s over, Anakin!” Obi-Wan shouted from the upper slope of the lava river’s shore on the volcanic planet Mustafar. “I have the high ground!”

Anakin was indeed below Obi-Wan’s position, standing atop what was left of a floating mining platform that glided over the lava. Glaring at Obi-Wan, Anakin growled, “You underestimate my power.”

Obi-Wan had escaped Utapau when his own clone troops—obeying Palpatine’s secret Order 66—had opened fire on him. Leaving Utapau in General Grievous’ starfighter, he had followed a coded signal to find temporary refuge on the *Tantive IV*, the consular starship owned by Bail Organa, a Senator from Alderaan, who was an ally to the Jedi. The *Tantive IV* had also harbored Yoda, who had escaped a similar assassination by clones on the Wookiee homeworld, Kashyyk. Organa delivered Obi-Wan and Yoda back to Coruscant, where they found the Jedi Temple in ruins, and all the resident Jedi—even the youngest initiates—lying dead.

And then they had viewed a recording that revealed Anakin was responsible for the slaughter. They also discovered Senator Palpatine was a Sith Lord, and that he had enlisted Anakin to the dark side, and dubbed his new apprentice as “Darth Vader.”

Ryder Windham

Obi-Wan had gone to Padmé to warn her about Anakin, and then stowed away in her starship when she went in search of Anakin. They had landed on Mustafar, where Anakin had just butchered the leaders of the Confederacy. When Anakin saw Obi-Wan, he had become enraged with Padmé and accused them both of conspiring to kill him. He had tried to strangle Padmé, and then his fight with Obi-Wan had begun.

The long, grueling duel had carried them far from the landing pad where Padmé's ship had landed. Now, the battle had neared its end.

Obi-Wan realized what Anakin was about to do, and despite all that had recently transpired, he pleaded, "Don't try it."

Gripping his lightsaber, Anakin leaped high into the air over Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan's lightsaber swept out at his attacker, swiftly severing Anakin's left arm above the elbow and both legs at the knees.

Anakin shouted and lost his grip on his lightsaber as his maimed body crashed upon black, smoldering sand and tumbled down the slope. Obi-Wan watched in horror as Anakin came to a rest near the edge of the lava river, and lifted his head to face his former friend and Master. Anakin's eyes were filled with inhuman rage.

"You were the Chosen One!" Obi-Wan shouted.

Anakin retained his prosthetic right arm, and as he struggled to pull himself away from the lava, his eyes continued to blaze with fury at Obi-Wan.

"It was said you would destroy the Sith, not join them!" Obi-Wan continued. "Bring balance to the Force, not leave it in darkness!" Unable to look at his former apprentice, he turned away. He spied Anakin's fallen lightsaber, and bent down to pick it up before he turned to look at Anakin again.

"I hate you!" Anakin roared.

Obi-Wan stood in silence, stunned as he faced the seething, ruined remains of Anakin. "You were my brother, Anakin," Obi-Wan said, "I loved you."

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Anakin's clothes caught fire, and he screamed as he was suddenly engulfed in flames.

For a moment, Obi-Wan hesitated. *He's gone*, Obi-Wan thought. *Anakin is gone*.

Obi-Wan finally turned away.

Anakin kept screaming.

As Obi-Wan staggered back to Padmé's starship, he was greeted by two droids: R2-D2, who had arrived on Mustafar with Anakin, and Anakin's gleaming, gold-plated protocol droid C-3PO, who had accompanied Padmé from Coruscant.

"Oh, Master Kenobi," C-3PO said as he came down the ship's landing ramp. "Um, we have Miss Padmé on board."

As Obi-Wan quickened his step, C-3PO continued, "Yes. Please, please hurry. We should leave this dreadful place."

Obi-Wan was very concerned about Padmé because he knew she was pregnant. He also knew that Anakin was the father.

Leaving Mustafar, Obi-Wan and the droids brought Padmé to a research base in the Polis Massa asteroid system, where Obi-Wan and Bail Organa were waiting for them. Padmé was unconscious, and Obi-Wan carried her directly to the base's medical center.

A medical droid delivered the terrible news in a flat voice. Padmé was dying. She had lost the will to live. The droid added that they would have to operate quickly to save Padmé's babies—Padmé was carrying twins.

Obi-Wan was in the operating room for the delivery of Padmé's babies. She named her son Luke and her daughter Leia.

As Obi-Wan held Luke in his arms, Padmé beckoned, "Obi-Wan?" He met her gaze, and she said, "There's good in him." She gasped, then continued, "I know. I know there's...still—"

And then Padmé Amidala died.

Obi-Wan just stood there for a moment, holding the baby boy in stunned silence. He had felt so utterly powerless as Padmé breathed her last, and not just because he couldn't stop her from

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dying. Even though he believed that there wasn't a trace of goodness left in Anakin, he also knew that it would have been a kindness on his part if he had somehow assured the dying woman that he shared her conviction. All it would have taken on his part was a smile or a slight nod, and she might have died in peace. But in the end, he had been powerless to even manage that.

Leaving Polis Massa on Bail Organa's consular starship, *Tantive IV*, the group transported Padmé's body back to Naboo. While Organa's aides attended to Padmé's newborn babies, Obi-Wan met with Yoda and Bail in the *Tantive IV* conference room to discuss the fates of Luke and Leia.

Yoda sat at the head of a long table, with Obi-Wan seated to his left and Bail to his right. Yoda said, "Hidden, safe, the children must be kept."

Obi-Wan agreed. "We must take them somewhere where the Sith will not sense their presence."

"Hmm," Yoda murmured. "Split up they should be."

"My wife and I will take the girl," Bail volunteered. "We've always talked of adopting a baby girl. She will be loved with us."

"And what of the boy?" Obi-Wan asked.

"To Tatooine," Yoda said. "To his family send him."

Obi-Wan considered this, then said, "I will take the child and watch over him."

Bail and Obi-Wan exchanged glances, then rose from their seats. Yoda said, "Until the time is right, disappear we will."

Bail exited the conference room. Obi-Wan was about to leave, too, when Yoda said, "Master Kenobi, wait a moment." The elderly Jedi gestured for Obi-Wan to return to his seat, then continued, "In your solitude on Tatooine, training I have for you."

Not sure that he had heard correctly, Obi-Wan said, "Training?"

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“An old friend has learned the path to immortality,” Yoda said. “One who has returned from the netherworld of the Force. Your old Master.”

Astonished, Obi-Wan gasped, “Qui-Gon?”

“How to commune with him, I will teach you.”

R2-D2 had been to the Lars family moisture farm just prior to the Battle of Geonosis, and was able to provide the farm’s coordinates to Obi-Wan. The starfighter that Obi-Wan had taken from the late General Grievous had remained in *Tantive IV*’s docking bay, and Obi-Wan planned to use the starfighter to take Luke to a spaceport at Nar Shaddaa, a moon in a space sector controlled by the Hutts. As Obi-Wan carried Luke into the starfighter’s cockpit, R2-D2 beeped a farewell message to the Jedi. There was no point in Obi-Wan saying good-bye to C-3PO, for Bail Organa had already taken the security precaution of having the talkative protocol droid’s memory erased.

Holding Luke Skywalker’s swaddled form against his chest, Obi-Wan Kenobi sat in an uncomfortable seat on a crowded, Tatooine-bound starcruiser. The Jedi Master had little experience holding babies, but he did his best to look comfortable with the child in his arms.

Bail Organa had provided a supply of untraceable credits for Obi-Wan to pay for the journey to the sand planet. To further maintain secrecy, Obi-Wan and Luke were traveling to Tatooine via an indirect route starting from Nar Shaddaa on a series of public transports. During a layover at a space station, Obi-Wan witnessed a group of travelers at a HoloNet kiosk, watching a broadcast about recent events on Coruscant. Obi-Wan had cringed when he saw a hologram of Emperor Palpatine urging viewers to report anyone whom they suspected of being a Jedi or having “supernatural powers.” Palpatine’s words had prompted one traveler to remark, “Thank goodness those terrible Jedi were stopped!”

Ryder Windham

Obi-Wan had remained silent and kept his head low as he carried Luke. The Tatooine-bound starcruiser had been delayed, but he did everything he could to keep the baby comfortable. Unfortunately, the final flight turned out to be a nightmare. Most of the other passengers were either Podracers or obnoxious Podrace enthusiasts. Even more distressing, Obi-Wan was running low on the baby food supplements and sanitation material that the Polis Massans had provided. All in all, he was beginning to wonder if avoiding a more direct route had been a mistake.

Luke made a burbling sound. Obi-Wan patted the baby's back and said in a soothing tone, "Easy, young one. Easy now."

One of the Podracers, a nimble-handed Dug with goggles on his head, was exercising his arms by walking back and forth across the headrests on the seats in front of Obi-Wan. Without breaking his stride, the Dug turned to someone seated up ahead of him and shouted, "Hey, Bumpy! Your nose still hurtin' since the last time you punched Ben's Mesa?!" Then the Dug broke out into a wheezing laugh.

Keeping his eyes on the Dug, Obi-Wan shifted his arm around Luke to a more protective position and thought, *If that clown falls on top of us, so help me, he'll know what a punch feels like.*

Several seats ahead, a Nuknog—presumably "Bumpy"—jumped up and hurled an unopened bottled beverage at the Dug. The Dug saw the incoming bottle and jerked his body to the side to avoid getting hit, allowing the bottle to arc past his body and fall straight toward Luke.

Just as the Dug rapidly turned his pronounced snout around to see where the bottle would strike, Obi-Wan's right hand flew up and away from Luke to catch the bottle in midair. Obi-Wan held the bottle out to the Dug and said tersely, "I believe this was meant for you."

The Dug just looked at Obi-Wan for a moment, before muttering a half-hearted "Thanks." He took the bottle, opened it with his teeth, and then turned and whipped the bottlecap back

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at his would-be attacker. Returning his attention to Obi-Wan, he said, “You move fast for a human.”

Obi-Wan felt a chill travel down his spine. *Ob, no.*

The Dug’s mouth twisted back into a vicious leer, “In fact,” the Dug continued, “the only kind of humans I’ve ever heard of that can move that fast are—”

“Aren’t you tired?” Obi-Wan interrupted, his gaze riveted to the Dug’s eyes.

The Dug blinked, and his eyelids became suddenly heavy. He looked at his bottle, and then back to Obi-Wan. “Now that you mention it,” the Dug said with a wide yawn, “I *am* tired.”

“Forget you ever saw me, and take a long nap.”

“I didn’t see anybody,” the Dug muttered as his eyes closed. And then he fell backward, spilling the remaining contents of his bottle as his slumbering form tumbled onto the passengers seated in front of Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan silently cursed himself. He couldn’t have let the thrown bottle hit Luke, but his Jedi reflexes had nearly given him away. *Just one wrong move*, he thought. *All it takes is one wrong move.*

Luke wiggled against his chest.

I must be more careful.

Obi-Wan pulled his cloak down lower over his face. Except for a few soothing words to Luke, he spoke with no one else for the remainder of the flight.

The data provided by R2-D2 allowed Obi-Wan to find the Lars Homestead without difficulty. Obi-Wan was glad and relieved that Beru and Owen agreed to raise Luke, but his mission did not end there, as it was also his duty to watch over the boy. He had thought that his ongoing presence would be some comfort to Owen and Beru.

He soon learned that he was mistaken.

Chapter Seven

Not long after delivering Luke to Owen and Beru, Obi-Wan was riding his eopie east across the desert. He had acquired the eopie just after his arrival to Tatooine, when he needed a method of transport to deliver Luke to the Lars homestead, and the beast had continued to prove itself useful. It was while riding the eopie that he had found shelter for himself, a small hovel—at least it had a secure door—that had been carved out of a nearby canyon wall before it was abandoned by some unknown transient. The eopie also allowed him to check on the Lars homestead twice daily, at sunrise and sunset, which had become his routine.

Whenever he rode, he was always mindful of his surroundings and on the lookout for danger. He had already seen various signs of Tusken Raiders, and was fairly certain that at least one Tusken tribe had become aware of his presence.

Recently, while exploring the vast area around the Lars homestead, he had come upon what appeared to be the ruins of a camp in a canyon in the Jundland Wastes. He had traveled close enough to the ruins to see a cluster of bantha-rib arches sticking in the sand, all that remained of several small huts, the kind used by the nomadic Tuskens. Seeing the ruins, Obi-Wan had been suddenly overcome by a feeling of loneliness and despair, which ended a moment later, when a distant, blood-chilling howl

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echoed down from a nearby clifftop. Suspecting that he may have strayed into an area that was somehow sacred to Tusksens, he had proceeded past the ruins quickly.

Sometimes while riding, his thoughts would stray to Padmé on her deathbed. Speaking of Anakin, her last words had been, “There’s still good in him.”

And then he would think of how he had left Anakin to die on Mustafar.

He tried to suppress such thoughts. The problem was Obi-Wan remembered so many good years with Anakin, and really had loved him like a brother. It was still so hard for him to believe that Anakin had turned to evil. And even after all the unforgivable things he had done under the name of Darth Vader, Obi-Wan still found himself missing his friend Anakin Skywalker.

He also thought of Qui-Gon Jinn. Yoda had explained to Obi-Wan that Qui-Gon’s consciousness had survived as a spiritual entity, and described his own exchanges with Qui-Gon’s disembodied voice. Yoda had also instructed Obi-Wan how to communicate with Qui-Gon, but so far, Obi-Wan had yet to hear from his Master’s spirit.

The suns had almost set as he approached the perimeter of the Lars homestead. As usual, the security lights were already switched on and a few KPR servant droids were patrolling the area around the underground compound. On previous evenings, Owen had emerged from the entrance dome to check the droids before returning below ground for the night. Obi-Wan had come to interpret Owen’s action as a signal that all was well, and that it was time for him to make his way back to his hovel. But on this night, Obi-Wan found Owen standing several meters away from the entry dome, carrying a blaster rifle, and waiting for him.

Owen held the blaster rifle so it was aimed at the ground. Obi-Wan wasn’t surprised to see the weapon, as Owen always carried it when he stepped outside at nightfall. But even without Jedi powers, Obi-Wan could see the man looked jittery.

Ryder Windham

"Hello, Owen," Obi-Wan said as he brought the copie to a halt. "Is something wrong?"

Owen nodded once. Obi-Wan began to dismount, but Owen held up one hand and said, "Don't bother. What I have to say won't take long."

Obi-Wan kept his eyes on Owen as he shifted his weight back onto the copie.

"I'm not sure how to put this," Owen continued, "so I'm just going to say it. The way you come around my place...it bothers me."

Obi-Wan sighed. "I'm sorry, Owen. But as I told you, I need to make sure that the boy is—"

"Wait," Owen interrupted. "My wife and I are the ones raising Luke, right? That's what we agreed to?"

Obi-Wan nodded as he wondered where the conversation was going.

Owen said, "Well, I *didn't* agree to you checking on us daily, let alone twice a day. I don't mean any disrespect, but I've been keeping Tusken off my property for years, and...well, I think you coming here so often is just a bad idea!"

Keeping his voice calm, Obi-Wan said, "Owen, I assure you, I don't question your ability to handle the Tusken. But as we've already discussed, it's not the Tusken I'm worried about."

"Oh, right," Owen said. "It's the *Empire*. But then let me ask you something." Owen swallowed hard before he continued. "If you're so concerned about the child's well being, why don't you try staying away from us? Didn't you ever think what would happen to Luke if the Empire tracked you down and found you living in my backyard?"

Owen's words left Obi-Wan momentarily dumbstruck. Then he shook his head and said, "Forgive me, Owen. You're absolutely right. I'll be more careful. More discreet."

"That's a start," Owen said. "Again, I don't mean any disrespect, but...my wife and I can't raise Luke in any ordinary way if we know you're always lurking about. Understand?"

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“Yes,” Obi-Wan said. He expected—maybe even hoped—that Owen was going to say something more, but when he didn’t, Obi-Wan said, “Good night, Owen.”

Owen nodded once again, then turned and headed for the entry dome. Obi-Wan turned his eopie around and guided the creature back across the desert.

Obi-Wan continued to monitor Luke, but from greater distances and without any obvious routine. He had no reason to remain in the hovel near the Lars homestead, so like the transient who had lived there previously, Obi-Wan moved on.

He eventually found a slightly more spacious derelict structure in the Jundland Wastes, a small, domed-roofed hut that sat on a bluff at the southwestern edge of the Dune Sea. Like so many other buildings on Tatooine, it was made of synstone, a mixture of crushed local rock and dissolvants that could be cast into almost any shape. The hut was approximately 136 kilometers from the Lars homestead—farther than Obi-Wan would have preferred, but probably still too close to satisfy Owen Lars. From what Obi-Wan could see, no one had lived in the hut for a very long time. An old moisture vaporator stood beside it. Obi-Wan checked to see if the vaporator worked. It didn’t.

To confirm whether the hut was indeed abandoned, Obi-Wan traveled to the property bureau in Tatooine’s capitol city, Bestine. Inside the bureau, on the wall beside the information desk, there was a holographic map of Tatooine. Obi-Wan’s eyes happened to fall on a broad, flat-topped mountain that the map identified as *Ben’s Mesa*.

That sounds familiar, Obi-Wan thought. Then he recalled the loudmouth Dug who had been on the same flight that had brought him to the sand planet.

An antique, oval-faced droid clerk wobbled up behind the information desk, looked at Obi-Wan through tarnished photoreceptors and said, “May I help you, Mister—”

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“Ben,” Obi-Wan replied flatly. “I’m interested in a piece of property. The location coordinates are Alpha-1733-Mu-9033.”

The droid clerk turned his photoreceptors to a databank monitor and entered the coordinates. A moment later, he replied, “There are no filed claims or liens for the property at Alpha-1733-Mu-9033, Mr. Ben.”

Not sure he understood, Obi-Wan said, “In other words, the place is available?”

“No one lives there,” the droid answered curtly. “No one *wants* to live in the Jundland Wastes.” But then the droid’s head made a clicking sound as it evaluated the situation, and added, “Do you want to file a claim, sir?”

Obi-Wan considered making a claim under an assumed name, but then decided against it, knowing that he had a better chance of maintaining a secret presence on Tatooine if he stayed off of any official records. “No, thanks,” Obi-Wan said as he moved toward the exit. “I think the property should remain as it is.”

“As you wish, sir,” said the droid, not really caring one way or the other.

Obi-Wan’s next stop was a hardware shop, where he used most of his remaining credits to buy all the tools and supplies that he could afford and his eopie could carry.

Excluding the hovel he had lived in during his first weeks on Tatooine, Obi-Wan had never inhabited a place by himself for any great duration. Like most Jedi, he had lived much of his life at the Jedi Temple on Coruscant. Now, living in an area on a world where even the most basic supplies were difficult to obtain, he was hardly prepared for the work required to restore the abandoned hut. But while he monitored Luke over the months that followed, he also threw himself into making the hut as livable as possible. He had no idea how long he might reside on Tatooine, but he wouldn’t be a very useful Jedi if the roof over his head came crashing down on him.

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There was a surprising amount of wildlife in the Jundland Wastes. By watching various creatures, including his own eopie, Obi-Wan learned where to gather berries and vegetables. By watching womp rats and other omnivores, he also determined which animals were edible. His Jedi reflexes enabled him to catch the fast-running, two-legged rodents called scurriers as easily as most people could pull an amphibious gorg from its primal root puddle. But if he had to choose, he preferred the taste of gorgs.

For all of Obi-Wan's self-sufficient achievements, there were some things he simply couldn't do on his own. He required special tools and materials to fix and clean the moisture vaporator beside the hut, the stove in his living area, and the water cistern in the cellar. He was fortunate that a passing clan of Jawa traders took notice of him one day and parked their massive sandcrawler near his hut. Evidently, the maroon-cloaked creatures had become aware of the strange man who had moved to the Jundland Wastes, and were impressed by the fact that he had survived as long as he had. The Jawas were happy to share their tools and some spare supplies with Obi-Wan, especially after he offered to share some food with them.

Obi-Wan further gained favor with this clan after he noticed three young Jawas had taken a liking to his eopie, which he encouraged them to take as a gift from him. The Jawa leader responded by chittering and gesturing at the sandcrawler to convey that he would be happy to give Obi-Wan rides to the cities or settlements, which was exactly what the Jedi had hoped he would do. After all, Obi-Wan no longer required an eopie on a daily basis, and sandcrawlers traveled faster.

"Thank you, my friend," Obi-Wan answered the Jawa chief. "I just might take you up on that offer. Please, call me Ben."

Not long after befriending the Jawas, Obi-Wan rode with them to Anchorhead, a wind-scourged settlement about twenty kilometers east of the Lars homestead. Anchorhead was a small community and trading post, with about a dozen pourstone

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stores and two small cantinas. One of the larger buildings was Tosche Station, which supplied energy to most of the area moisture farms. Obi-Wan had told the Jawas that he was in search of either parts or a replacement for his hut's moisture vaporator, as he still hadn't managed to get it working properly, but he had another reason for making the journey. Using the Force, he had anticipated that Luke was heading into Anchorhead with his aunt and uncle.

Obi-Wan was in one of the cantinas, The Weary Traveler, having a drink of water as he watched Owen, Beru, and Luke. They were at the provisions store across the street from the cantina. Beru was carrying Luke in a sling that she wore over her chest. Obi-Wan had been careful to position himself so the Lars family would not see him. He was glad to see they all looked healthy and happy.

The cantina had an old hyperwave repeater that was broadcasting intermittent HoloNet displays of recent news reports from across the galaxy. Obi-Wan was looking at Luke when he thought he heard a female HoloNet reporter say the word "Jedi."

Obi-Wan looked to the cantina's HoloNet display, but a sudden burst of static interrupted the broadcast. He turned to human man seated two tables away and said, "What was she saying?"

"Band of Jedi were killed on Kashyyyk," the man replied.

Oh, no, Obi-Wan thought.

The broadcast resumed. The Empire claimed Kashyyyk had been plotting a rebellion. Imperial forces not only killed the unidentified Jedi but also thousands of Wookiees. Hundreds of thousands more Wookiees had been imprisoned.

Obi-Wan's mind reeled as he thought of the slain Jedi. *What were they thinking? They should have gone into hiding, not drawn attention to themselves! Couldn't they foresee what would happen to the Wookiees?*

The HoloNet display squawked and flickered again, then displayed an image of a dark figure, someone clad in black armor

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from head to toe. Although the audio transmission was garbled, the images conveyed that this armored being or thing played a major role hunting down and executing the Jedi.

Then Obi-Wan heard the reporter say the name *Darth Vader*.

A few minutes and another glass of water later, Obi-Wan picked up his rucksack and staggered out of the cantina. Although he had not forgotten that he had come to Anchorhead to check on Luke, his mind was no longer focused on staying out of sight from Owen Lars. His thoughts were on Vader.

He couldn't believe it. Somehow, Anakin had survived the duel on Mustafar, and had resumed his Sith title of Darth Vader. Obi-Wan had concealed his lightsaber beneath his robes, and as he walked along Anchorhead's main street, his right hand's fingers wrapped around the weapon protectively.

Did I drive Anakin deeper into the dark side by abandoning him on Mustafar?

Could I face Anakin again?

If I did, could I kill him?

Across the street, he saw Beru, carrying Luke as she walked beside Owen, moving from one store to the next. Fortunately, there were a few dozen other people walking about, and Owen and Beru were still unaware of Obi-Wan's presence. But as Obi-Wan's eyes locked onto the Lars family, the Jedi felt more uneasy than ever.

Should I warn them about Vader? Should I take Luke away from them? Hide him away on an even more remote world?

Obi-Wan had been trained to be fearless. But as he thought of Luke's safety, he was almost overwhelmed by the anxiety that swept over him. And then, from out of nowhere, he heard a disembodied voice—sounding not through his ears, but directly into his thoughts—that caused him to stop in his tracks.

"Obi-Wan."

Recognizing the voice immediately, Obi-Wan stopped in his tracks. "Qui-Gon! Master!"

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Obi-Wan was suddenly, acutely aware that anyone on the street might think he was talking to himself. Not wanting to be branded as a lunatic, he quickly moved into an alley between two stores. Although he had many questions for Qui-Gon, the HoloNet broadcast prompted him to first ask, “Master, is Darth Vader Anakin?”

“Yes,” Qui-Gon’s voice replied. “Although the Anakin you and I knew is imprisoned by the dark side.”

Standing in the alley, Obi-Wan scowled. “I was wrong to leave him on Mustafar. I should have made *sure* he was dead.”

“The Force will determine Anakin’s future. Obi-Wan: Luke must not be told that Vader is his father until the time is right.”

“Should I take further steps to hide Luke?”

“The core of Anakin that resides in Vader grasps that Tatooine is the source of nearly everything that causes him pain. Vader will never set foot on Tatooine, if only out of fear of reawakening Anakin.”

Genuinely relieved to hear this, Obi-Wan said, “Then my obligation is unchanged. But from what Yoda told me, I know that I have much to learn, Master.”

“You were always that way, Obi-Wan,” Qui-Gon said, his words unexpectedly fading out. But Obi-Wan knew they would speak again.

Though he was not fearful anymore, Obi-Wan stayed to watch over Luke, Beru, and Owen for a while longer, until it was time for them to return to their respective homes.

The next time Obi-Wan visited Anchorhead to obtain supplies, he found an unusual rectangular-shaped item in a junk shop. The shopkeeper was apparently unfamiliar with the item’s function, and was using it as a shelf to display a small selection of used power couplings. But Obi-Wan—now known locally as Ben—recalled handling similar objects in the collection of the Jedi Archives, and recognized the “shelf” as an ancient, leather-bound book.

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Obi-Wan moved the power couplings aside and opened the book. Incredibly, only a few pages were slightly discolored, and all were blank. He had never considered writing a journal before, but suddenly realized that a journal would be a good way to preserve information about the Jedi.

Information that Luke might need someday.

Holding the book up for the shopkeeper to see, Obi-Wan said, "Do you know if this thing will burn properly?"

The shopkeeper shrugged. "Beats me what it's good for, Ben," he said. "But it's yours for a credit."

Ben did not haggle.

Chapter Eight

Ben Kenobi had been on Tatooine for nearly two years when he learned about an unusual increase of atrocities committed by Tusken Raiders. According to fragmented reports, the Tuskens had attacked three moisture farms and left seven colonists dead in a single day. But what disturbed Kenobi even more than the killings was the unnerving disturbance in the Force that came with them. It was as if a dark presence had touched upon the desert world, creating an almost tangible trace of evil in the air.

Could it be the Sith? Ben didn't know. All he could do was keep a closer eye on Luke.

Leaving his home in the Jundland Wastes, he found a bantha that had strayed from its herd. Because taming such beasts was a simple task for a Jedi Master, Ben was soon riding the bantha, heading southwest. He had intended to travel directly to the Lars homestead, but was just a few kilometers into his journey when he neared the ruins of the Tusken camp—the same one he had discovered not long after his arrival on Tatooine, from the back of his old copie—and he came to a stop.

The camp ruins always emanated a dreadful feeling whenever Ben traveled near it, and he had never felt compelled to inspect it more closely. On this particular day, the feeling was worse, practically sickening, and yet Ben sensed that the place was

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somehow beckoning him. He tried to urge the bantha forward, but the bantha took only two cautious steps before it came to a halt, then snorted at the sand and refused to budge.

Because the Tusken had used bantha ribs as supports for their huts, Ben could hardly blame his mount for wanting to keep her distance from the ruins. He dismounted, leaving the bantha as he walked closer to the ruins.

Amidst the remnants of one hut, he noticed a bantha rib arch with dark spatters on it, the kind of spatters only blood could make. Then he saw two rawhide strips that dangled from the arched ribs. Noting the height and position of the rawhide strips, Ben knew immediately that they had been used to secure a captive human's outstretched arms.

And then it hit him.

This is where Anakin's mother died.

Ben didn't just sense it, he knew it for a fact. For a moment, he resisted the urge to tear his eyes from the rawhide strips because he feared that if he looked away, the ruins might disappear along with the knowledge that came with them. When he did finally pry his gaze from the bloodstained arch, he saw the numerous bones that poked up through the sand around and throughout the ruins, bones that were much too small to have come from banthas. Shmi Skywalker had not died alone.

Ben did not have to guess who had slaughtered the Tusken.

"Now you know," said Qui-Gon Jinn's disembodied voice.

Ben was still so stunned that he didn't even slightly flinch when he heard Qui-Gon, whose voice sounded as if it came from above and behind Ben's head. Ben said, "Why didn't you tell me about this?"

"You weren't ready," Qui-Gon said. "You're *still* not ready."

"Not ready?" Ben echoed. He swallowed hard before he continued, "Master, if you mean that I'm not ready to understand what happened here, then I believe you're mistaken. Anakin killed an entire tribe of Tusken out of vengeance, and then kept it a secret from everyone. Apparently, you were aware of this,

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and yet you *still* maintain he is the Chosen One. What more is there to know?"

Qui-Gon answered, "That Anakin did not keep it a secret from *everyone*."

Ben sighed. "Of course. He would have told Padmé. And Palpatine. And I suspect that if he didn't actually tell Owen Lars, then Owen figured it out for himself. If Owen has the impression that Jedi are prone to murder in the name of revenge, that would certainly explain why he's so cautious of me." Ben returned his gaze to the leather strips.

"And why did Anakin keep his secret from you?"

Ben was about to reply, *Because he was afraid he'd be banished from the Jedi*, but instead he shook his head and said, "It doesn't matter whom Anakin told. What matters is that he was a Jedi, and that he became a butcher."

"You should not judge when you fail to understand."

Exasperated, Ben demanded, "Understand *what*, Master?"

"As I said, you're still not ready."

Ben sighed. "Well, when I am ready, I hope you'll let me know." He turned and began walking back to the waiting bantha.

"For now, Obi-Wan, know this," Qui-Gon said gravely, his voice sounding as if it were traveling alongside Ben. "Anakin revealed his secret to one other."

"Master, please," Ben said without breaking his stride. "If this is another guessing game, I don't think I—"

"A'Sharad Hett."

Ben stopped in his tracks. Since his arrival on Tatooine, he had thought of the Tusken Jedi on various occasions. He had assumed that Hett was among the many casualties of the Jedi purge. He said, "I don't believe you ever met A'Sharad Hett, Master."

"No," Qui-Gon replied, "I never did. But I did know his father. The Force was strong in the Hett family."

Glancing back at the ruins, Ben said, "The Tusken that Anakin killed...were they Hett's tribe? Are you telling me that

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A'Sharad Hett is alive, that he's involved with the recent killings on Tatooine?"

"I cannot say," Qui-Gon answered vaguely.

Just then, a hot wind gusted across the ruins and swept over Ben. He was about to ask whether Qui-Gon was unable or unwilling to reveal certain details, but then his Master said, "May the Force be with you, Obi-Wan."

A moment after Qui-Gon's words trailed off with the wind, Ben turned away once again from the ruins. He climbed onto the bantha's back and rode off.

Ben rode the bantha all night. When he arrived at the outer perimeter of the Lars homestead, he released the bantha and continued on foot. As he walked past one of Owen's moisture vaporator towers, he saw a KPR droid peek out from behind the vaporator.

Ben ignored the droid. *Let Owen know I'm coming*, he thought. He suspected that Owen would rather see him than the Tuskens, at least.

He stopped half a kilometer from the domed entry to the Lars family's subterranean home, and pitched a low, sand-colored tent. He kept his cloaked body close to the ground, watching the horizon and listening for any rising dust or movement that might indicate incoming Tuskens.

Two days and nights passed. On the third morning, Ben finally saw someone approach. It was Owen Lars, walking straight toward him from the entry dome.

As usual, he was carrying a blaster rifle.

Rising up from the sand, Ben bowed his head and said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Lars."

Owen rested the blaster rifle against his leg, the barrel pointed toward the ground. "I guess you heard about the recent attacks?"

Obi-Wan was slightly taken aback—he had expected Owen to immediately reprimand him for trespassing. Gesturing to his tent,

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Ben said, "That's why I'm here. Forgive me, Owen, I know you don't want me on your land. I tried to be discreet."

"Yeah, well, I've been keeping watch, too. And just so you know, I saw you arrive three days ago."

Ben was pleased that Owen had been monitoring the KPR droids, but he had the feeling that Owen wasn't in any mood to hear him say so. He noticed that Owen's eyes were somewhat bleary, probably from lack of sleep. Ben stayed quiet, waiting for Owen to continue.

Owen glanced back to his own home, then returned his gaze to Ben. "Normally, I'd tell you to get lost. But I just got word from a friend in Bestine. The Sand People attacked another farm." Owen looked away again. "Only one survivor," he continued. "A little girl. But she didn't last long."

Ben sighed. "I'm sorry, Owen."

"I'm not finished!" Owen roared, his eyes now blazing at Ben. The edge of Owen's upper lip quivered nervously.

He's not just angry, Ben realized. He's terrified.

Owen licked his lips before he continued. "The little girl...she said she saw one of the Sand People, maybe their chief. She said he...he used two 'laser swords.'"

Over the past three days since Ben's last exchange with Qui-Gon Jinn's spirit, Ben had had plenty of time to consider the possibility that A'Sharad Hett was involved in the recent killings. Still, hearing Owen's description of the marauder's leader made him feel suddenly queasy.

Oblivious to Ben's discomfort, Owen said through clenched teeth, "I don't suppose you've heard about any missing lightsabers on the planet, Mr. Jedi?"

"Get hold of yourself, Owen," he said, keeping his voice calm. "You know I had nothing to do with the attacks."

"Maybe not!" Owen said bitterly. "But I have some idea of what Jedi are capable of!"

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"You're talking about Anakin," Ben said, "About what he did after he learned that his mother had been taken by Tusken." It wasn't a question.

Owen winced, and then he scowled at the ground. "Shmi Skywalker was a good woman," he said. "We tried to rescue her, but my father..." The words caught in his throat, and he left the sentence unfinished. Tilting his chin in the direction of the entry dome, he continued, "When Anakin brought Shmi's body home, I'll never forget the look on his face. If killing me would have brought his mother back to life, I know he would have killed me then and there. I could see it in his eyes."

Ben grimaced. "Anakin never told me what really happened, Owen. Please trust that what he did that day was *not* the way of the Jedi."

"Well, I'm not so sure if that's a relief," Owen said. "Much as I didn't like the way he looked at me, I like the idea of Tusken with lightsabers even less. There's not a person on Tatooine who wouldn't be happy if all the Tusken were dead."

Ben offered no response. He knew that the deaths of Tusken would not bring him any happiness, but he didn't believe there was any reason in explaining this to Owen.

Owen returned his gaze to Ben and said, "Look, I didn't mean anything bad against Jedi. I just figured you should know about this Sand Person out there, because maybe you're the only one who can stop him."

Owen looked away again. Ben thought, *He doesn't want to ask for my help. He's just too proud and stubborn.* "If it's all right with you," Ben said, "I'd like to stay close to your farm for a while. Just in case."

"Fine," Owen said flatly. He gestured to the nearest moisture vaporator and said, "If you need some water, help yourself." Then he turned and walked back to the domed entry to his home.

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The Tusken Raiders arrived the next morning, at the strike of dawn. Instead of approaching from the east, which would have made them more difficult to see against the blinding, rising suns, they rode their banthas in from the west. Ben would have noticed them had they come from any direction across the desert, but he did briefly wonder why they chose their approach as they had. Then he dismissed the thought. *There's just no predicting Tusks.*

Ben had moved closer to the moisture farm during the night. As the bantha-mounted Tusks drew closer, they saw his cloaked form silhouetted against the sunrise. A breeze blew out from across the desert, and Ben's robes flapped against his body, revealing his lightsaber at his belt.

Most of the Tusks were carrying *gaderffii*, long club-like weapons that some colonists referred to as "gaffi sticks." The Tusken on the lead bantha came to a stop a short distance away. The Tusken brayed in his native, guttural language to address his tribesman, then dismounted his bantha and walked slowly over to Ben. Attached to the Tusken's belt were two lightsabers. The moment Ben saw the weapons, the Tusken's identity was confirmed.

It was A'Sharad Hett.

Ben did not know whether Hett was aware that Anakin Skywalker had become Darth Vader. But if Hett knew—as Qui-Gon's spirit claimed—that Anakin was responsible for killing the Tusks who tortured his mother, Ben could only imagine what Hett might do if he discovered the existence of Anakin Skywalker's son. Ben suspected that Hett knew nothing about Luke, if only because Luke was still alive. If Hett's sole purpose on Tatooine had been to kill Luke, Luke would probably be dead already. Now, as Hett approached, Ben banished all thoughts of Anakin and Luke from his mind.

Hett stopped in front of Ben, standing so close that Ben had to be careful not to inhale too deeply, for the stench of Hett's filthy robes and wrappings was almost overwhelming. Gazing

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into the red lenses of the Tusken's goggles, Ben said, "Master Hett."

"The Force be with you, Master Kenobi," replied Hett, his voice remarkably calm. "So, you too survived Order 66. I thought I was alone. What brings you to Tatooine, let alone these trackless wastes?"

"*You* do, Master Hett," Ben said without hesitation. Keeping his eyes fixed on Hett's goggles, he continued, "You lead these Tusks as their warlord. Not something a Jedi should do."

"Do not lecture me, Obi-Wan," Hett replied, still calm and without any hint of threat. "We were both generals in the Clone Wars, 'warlords' for a republic that turned on us." Hett shifted his feet slightly and turned to look past Ben and let his gaze travel across the moisture farm. "The Tusks have been hunted and killed by both settlers and farmers. Jedi defend those who need help. Sometimes you defend life by taking the life of the aggressor."

"Past mistakes do not justify current ones," Ben said, not letting his eyes stray from Hett. "The danger is in becoming what you fight. It was the trap that the Jedi fell into. It is the trap that takes you now. It must stop. You *must* see that, A'Sharad Hett."

"I do not," Hett replied grimly. "I was raised to manhood amongst Tusks by my father, Sharad Hett, the greatest Jedi of his age. He taught me to think and act as a Tusken." He remained facing the farm but gestured to the mounted Tusks, and raised his voice as he said, "These are my people! Will the settlers stop killing Tusks?"

Ben did not answer. He believed that the Tusks could kill every settler on Tatooine and their hunger for violence would still be unsatisfied.

Taking Ben's silence as a negative response, Hett said, "Then blood calls for blood! The settlers will be forced to abandon the land...or be buried beneath it!"

"I cannot permit that," Ben said as he drew his lightsaber. "You were a great Jedi, Hett, and the son of a great Jedi, but you

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have given yourself over to revenge. It stops here.” Ben ignited his lightsaber.

“You will have a Jedi funeral, Master Kenobi,” Hett said. “That I promise.”

Hett’s hands dropped to his belt and the two lightsabers practically leapt into his gloved hands. He ignited both weapons at once, unleashing their identical green energy beams. He swung fast with the lightsaber in his right hand but Ben blocked it. The lightsabers sizzled loudly as they clashed.

It was fortunate for Ben that he had continued his Jedi exercises on Tatooine, that he had not allowed his reflexes to become dull. He did not think about how long it had been since he had last used his lightsaber in combat. Nor did consider that he was older than Hett by at least a decade, or Hett’s considerable skills with his own weapons, and that the Tusken was far more experienced at fighting in the desert. Ben knew that any such thoughts would probably only get him killed.

As prepared as Ben was for many things, he was not ready to die. Not yet. Not today.

Hett brought his other lightsaber in at a sharp angle, forcing Ben to lurch back. Ben gripped his own weapon with both hands as he swung at Hett’s legs, but Hett blocked the swipe. There was another loud sizzle as the blades dragged across each other.

Ben gasped as Hett launched a powerful kick to his midriff. The kick knocked Ben off his feet, and as he fell back through the air, Hett hurled one of his lightsabers at Ben’s body. Ben clung tight to his own lightsaber as he twisted his body in midair to avoid being struck by the spinning blade of Hett’s weapon. The moment Hett’s lightsaber whipped past Ben’s head, Hett used the Force to retrieve it, drawing it back to his waiting left hand.

As Hett caught the lightsaber, Ben rolled up from the ground and swung out again. Hett blocked the strike with his right lightsaber, then threw his left arm forward to smash his other lightsaber’s handle into Ben’s jaw.

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Ben ignored the painful jolt to his head and reflexively brought his blade up high, forcing Hett to block the blow with his right lightsaber and leaving his own midsection briefly exposed. Before Hett could strike with his other lightsaber, Ben kicked him hard in the stomach.

Hett grunted, but he didn't go down. He lashed out again at Ben, kicking up sand as he moved in for the kill. Not one of the mounted Tuskenes so much as flinched as they watched the duel, nor did they rally for their chief. They merely watched in silence, waiting for the outcome.

Ben blocked each blow, but he wasn't doing it with ease. Hett was far more experienced at fighting on the sand and in the desert heat. Ben knew that his opponent would never surrender, let alone withdraw. As much as he hoped to avoid killing Hett, he also knew that they couldn't keep fighting indefinitely.

But in the end, Ben knew he wasn't fighting for his own life. He was fighting for Luke's.

Quickly raising his left hand, Ben used the Force to push out at Hett, shoving him back through the air as Ben's lightsaber swept up and through Hett's right arm. Hett shouted as his arm fell away from his body. As Hett stumbled back, Ben used the Force to tear Hett's other lightsaber from his left hand's grip. Both of Hett's lightsabers deactivated as they sailed past Ben and landed in the sand behind him.

Hett crumpled to his knees. His tribesmen watched as Ben stepped forward, leaned down to grip the top of Hett's facemask, and then pulled the mask off his head.

The fallen Jedi cradled the wounded stump of his right arm as he lifted his gaze to meet Ben's. Hett's unmasked face was that of a human, but covered with black, angular tattoos.

Ben had no idea whether Hett's species or tattoos were an exception or the norm for Tuskenes. Ben held the mask out before him, and then dropped it onto the sand in front of Hett's kneeling form.

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Without a sound, the mounted Tusks slowly turned their banthas around and began heading away from the moisture farm. Hett did not watch them depart, but continued staring at the sand in front of him. Ben, still wielding his activated lightsaber, remained standing near Hett, waiting for his next move.

"I am finished," Hett said, still averting his gaze. "You have disgraced me before my people. With one hand, I can no longer wield a gaderffii. I am now an outcast among the Tusks." He said all this without a trace of emotion, and then added, "I am a dead man. Finish it. Kill me."

"No," Ben said as he deactivated his lightsaber. "But you can no longer stay on Tatooine. You must leave and give your word, by your father's honor, to never return."

Hett's brow furrowed.

Ben said, "Swear it."

Hett glowered, refusing to look at Ben, but then he finally muttered, "I so swear..."

Clipping his lightsaber to his belt, Ben said, "The Tusks were once your people, but so were the Jedi. You have forgotten our ways. Perhaps, with meditation, you will remember them and yourself."

Hett offered no response.

"I hope you will," Ben said. "May the Force be with you, A'Sharad Hett." Then Ben turned and began walking toward the entry dome of the moisture farm. He was halfway to the dome when he glanced back to where he'd left the former Jedi, but Hett was already gone.

Owen Lars, still carrying his blaster rifle, was waiting for Ben in the doorway of the entry dome. Ben wondered if Owen had seen any of the vicious fight that had just occurred on his property. He hoped that he hadn't, and wasn't sure what to say. He just wanted to assure Owen that the Tusks were gone. Before he could speak, Owen said, "It's over now, is it?"

"Yes," Ben said. The word almost cracked in his throat, and he suddenly realized just how thirsty he was.

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“Well, then,” Owen said. “You’d best be going.” Then Owen turned and closed the door behind him.

Ben brushed the dust off his robe. After gathering his camp gear, he began the long walk back home.

He never saw A’Sharad Hett again.

Chapter Nine

Luke is in danger.

This awareness came suddenly and unexpectedly to Ben Kenobi. He had just stepped outside of his home and was carrying a compact toolkit to run a maintenance check on his moisture vaporator when the sensation hit him, a definite disturbance in the Force.

Ben froze in his tracks, stopping just shy of the vaporator. His grip automatically tightened on the toolkit's handle. He had been living on Tatooine for thirteen years, and although he had sensed disturbances in the Force before, he had never felt one quite like this.

Did Luke generate it? Ben wasn't sure. Luke was thirteen now. To the best of Ben's knowledge, the boy still knew nothing of the Force, but it was possible that Luke was unwittingly acting like a transmitter.

With his free hand, Ben reached up to pull his hood back, exposing his head to the blistering heat. A warm, steady wind gusted up from the desert floor, carrying with it dust and the distinct sound of an incoming Jawa sandcrawler that had not yet come into view.

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Ben knew he had to stay calm. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes. He relaxed his mind, tuning out the noise of the sandcrawler's engine, and opening himself to the Force.

Almost immediately, he had a vision of flowing colors, a formless rush of tans and brown and...

Sandstorm!

...green...a dewback, running fast, leaving Luke and another boy behind it. Ben couldn't distinguish the other boy, but sensed he was one of Luke's friends...and not Biggs Darklighter.

An accident, Ben realized. Caught in a sandstorm...the dewback tossed them...

The boys were surrounded by high walls.

...in a canyon. Where?

Eyes still shut, Ben felt his feet shift beneath him, turning him until he stopped, facing southeast. He ignored the heat from the suns that bristled against the back of his neck. Seconds later, through closed eyes, he visualized a distinctive, jagged rock formation that loomed over the winding channels of a dried river bed.

Ja-Mero Ridge.

Ben sighed as he opened his eyes to gaze out across the Jundland Wastes. A hazy cloud was suspended over the area of Ja-Mero Ridge, just over seventy kilometers away. Because people had been known to lose their way in the twisted canyons even in clear weather, and because darkness would fall within a few hours, he knew that Luke and his friend might need help sooner than later.

Of all the times not to own a landspeeder!

Ben rapidly calculated how many hours it might take him to reach Ja-Mero Ridge if he traveled by foot, and checked his utility belt to make certain he carried adequate rations. As he walked around to the front of his house and placed the toolkit on the ground near the front door, it occurred to him that he might attempt to contact Owen Lars, but then immediately dismissed the idea. The Lars Homestead was easily another seventy

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kilometers *beyond* Ja-Mero Ridge, and Owen would just insist he didn't need Ben's help. *The stubborn fool would probably go searching for Luke and get himself lost or killed.*

Ben knew that both Owen and Beru would be worried sick if they had any idea of Luke's predicament, but there was nothing he could do about that now. Luke was in danger, and there was no time to waste. If he had any chance of finding the boys by nightfall, he would have to do it on his own.

Ben started walking away from his house. "Seventy kilometers," he muttered as he brushed the dust from his beard. "I don't suppose I'll have an easy time finding a taxi."

Just then, the Jawa sandcrawler came into view. The mammoth vehicle was traveling west across the Xelric Draw, heading for Mos Espa.

"Ah," Ben said with a wry smile. "My taxi!"

The sandcrawler was moving fast, and Ben imagined the Jawas were eager to reach their destination. Reaching out with the Force, he visualized the chief Jawa on board the sandcrawler, and then projected a thought: *You should stop to check your engines.*

As if in response, the sandcrawler rumbled to a stop near the base of the bluff below Ben's house, and then several Jawas scurried out of the vehicle. Ben trudged down the bluff to meet the Jawas, who told him they had stopped to check their engines. Ben was not surprised that they found nothing wrong.

Ben conferred with the chief Jawa. A few minutes later, the sandcrawler pulled away from the bluff, carrying Ben with it. When the sandcrawler turned around to head into the Jundland Wastes, most of the Jawas were baffled by their change in course, but the chief Jawa insisted that it would be their pleasure to take Ben to Ja-Mero Ridge.

The wind was wailing when the sandcrawler came to a stop a short distance from the mouth of a narrow canyon. Ben climbed out, pulling his cloak up over his head to keep the stinging sand

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out of his face. As the sandcrawler turned around and drove away, Ben moved ahead, proceeding into the canyon.

As much as he looked forward to the day when he might meet Luke, he had no idea whether this would be that day. He had to allow the possibility that Luke and his friend could find their way out of the canyon without assistance, and saw no reason to reveal his presence to Luke unless it was absolutely necessary.

Ben kept moving. As he ventured deeper into the canyon, the air became noticeably colder. The sandstorm's gusts made it difficult to see more than a few meters in any direction. With the suns setting, he estimated total darkness in less than thirty minutes. He wondered just how well Luke was prepared to survive away from the Lars Homestead. *If he's as impulsive as his father, he'll think he's prepared for anything, even if he isn't*, he mused.

Some stones on the canyon floor had been recently disturbed, possibly kicked up by a large animal, maybe the dewback that Ben had visualized earlier. He followed the vanished animal's path until he met a fork in the canyon. Something in the air told him to take the left fork, which wound up leading him around a bend that brought him to another fork.

It's like a maze down here, Ben thought as he took the right fork, which was slightly wider than the other. Squinting his eyes, he glanced straight up and beyond the looming canyon walls, past the streaking gusts of sand, where a sliver of purple sky displayed a glimpse of a few dim stars. He didn't need to use the stars to get his bearings, but Luke might, as it would be easy for anyone to lose all sense of direction on the canyon floor.

Lowering his gaze, he continued into the encroaching darkness. Through the wind, he heard occasional sounds of creatures within canyon. None of them sounded threatening, but Ben had to concentrate to filter out the more distracting noises as he searched for the boys.

A small, unseen lizard, concealed within one of the many cracks in the wall to Ben's right, let out an anxious chirp. A moment later, Ben heard a swiftly approaching humming sound,

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and he ducked fast as several sketto whipped through the air. The four-winged, flying reptiles tore past him, angling back the way he had come until they vanished around a bend. Ben knew that the sketto normally stayed put during sandstorms, and he wondered what, if anything, had spooked them.

And then he heard a blood-curdling roar. Loud as thunder, it seemed to come from just around the next turn in the canyon. Ben recognized the cry instantly.

Krayt dragon!

His eyes went wide with alarm, but he was already moving, running as fast as he could around the turn. But when he emerged at another fork, where two ravines intersected, he stopped sharply. There was no sign of the beast.

An echo, he realized, at the same time sensing that Luke was still alive...*frightened*, but still alive. Ben almost cursed himself for not having discerned the roar as an echo before he went bounding into action like an overeager amateur. He stood frozen at the canyon's natural intersection, waiting for another sound to follow, and hoping that it wouldn't be human screams.

A moment later, there came a loud thud, something like a battering ram hitting a canyon wall. The crash reverberated down from the ravine at Ben's left. He ran into the ravine with his eyes forward, moving surely over and past jagged stones. As he ran, his nostrils flared slightly as he picked up the ugly scent of gored flesh, and then he almost ran straight into the source. It was a dewback's carcass.

Ben did not pause to examine the slaughtered dewback that practically filled the path before him. He scrambled over its body and kept running. He heard a steady thumping sound, but it was several strides later before he realized with some annoyance that the sound came from his own heart, which was pounding unusually fast. *Getting old*, he thought ruefully.

He focused on his heartbeat, slowing and stabilizing it as he ran on. The passage between the walls delivered Ben to the top of a ledge that overlooked a wider but still enclosed area.

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Looking into the gloom, he saw a krayt dragon—a canyon krayt, wild with hunger and rage—running straight for the mouth of a crevice. And inside the crevice were two cringing figures.

“Luke!” Ben shouted, without thinking or caring about whether he revealed his presence or awareness of Luke’s identity. The dragon’s massive horned head slammed into the crevice’s outer wall, and stones exploded at the impact.

From inside the crevice, Luke’s friend screamed, “We’re dead!”

Not quite, Ben thought with immense relief, but then the krayt backed up and prepared to charge again. Using the Force, Ben reached out to the krayt dragon’s primitive mind.

The monstrous beast suddenly stopped and roared, baring its long, yellowed teeth. Then it shook its wide head as if it were trying to shake something free, and snorted hard before it backed away from the crevice. Try as it might, and hungry as the krayt had been, it couldn’t get rid of the thought that had suddenly entered its brain: it was tired. Very, very tired.

Sleep.

As gusts of sand continued to blast through the area, the krayt lowered its body onto the canyon floor, closed its eyes, and began to snore in great, long rasps.

Ben eased himself down from the ledge and stepped past the slumbering krayt to approach the crevice. As he neared the position of the two hiding boys, he heard Luke’s friend whimper, “We’re never going to find the way home! They’ll find our bones one day...just old bones...”

Ben cleared his throat, and both boys jumped within the crevice as they turned their heads to face him. Both boys had sand goggles draped around their necks and were similarly attired in the faded white tunics and leggings that were typical of most moisture farmers. When Luke’s eyes met his own, it suddenly occurred to Ben that Luke was the same age he had been when he made his first journey to Ilum.

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Ben decided that this was, after all, the day he would finally introduce himself to Luke.

"I'm Ben Kenobi," he said. "We don't have much time if I'm going to get you boys home."

Luke gasped, "Do...do you know the way to the Lars homestead?"

Knowing that the less Luke knew of his purpose on Tatooine, the better, Ben appeared thoughtful and said, "Lars? Now, would that be Owen and Beru Lars?"

Luke nodded.

"It's been a very long time since I've seen them," Ben said, "but yes, I think I know the way."

He motioned for the boys to put their goggles on and follow him. Exiting the cramped crevice, they walked after Ben as he led them around the sleeping krayt. Although the boys had no idea where they were headed, they trusted Ben and kept up with him through the meandering turns in the canyon.

The winds began to die down as they exited the canyon, and the night sky was mostly clear above the area where Ben had parted ways with the sandcrawler. Luke's young friend was apparently stunned by the abrupt change in weather, for he stammered, "What happened?"

"We're in the eye of the storm," Ben said, his eyes on the clouds that seemed to be churning against the horizon.

"If we keep a quick pace," Luke said, "we can travel with it long enough to find a safe shelter."

Luke's friend shook his head, and then sagged to his knees. Ben crouched down to examine the boy and confirmed that he was just exhausted. Lifting his gaze to Luke, Ben said, "I can carry your friend if you can keep pace, young man."

"Luke," Luke said. "Luke Skywalker."

Ben looked at him quizzically, wondering if the boy had heard when he'd called out his name in the canyon. If Luke had heard, he didn't mention it, but instead gestured to the other boy and

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said, “My friend is Windy Starkiller. We sure were lucky that krayt fell asleep when it did.”

“Yes,” Ben said as he lifted Windy up onto his back. “Lucky.” Although he knew that luck had nothing to do with the krayt, he saw no point in telling Luke more than he needed to know. *He’s not ready for the truth*, Ben thought. As he walked off with Windy on his back, Luke at his side, and the stars above his head, his thoughts strayed to the dewback, who certainly hadn’t been lucky that day.

Perhaps Luke won’t ever be ready.

Ben glanced at Luke and saw his lower lip was trembling. “Something wrong, young Luke?”

“I was just thinking about our dewback,” Luke replied. “He belonged to Windy, but we both took care of him. His name was Huey.”

Ben found it interesting that he and Luke had been thinking of the dewback at the same time, but he stayed silent as he walked alongside Luke, waiting for the boy to continue.

“It’s my fault he died,” Luke said. “Windy and I were bored, and some of the older kids had been calling us ‘small fry,’ so...we decided to ride Huey out into the Wastes.”

Ben nodded slightly to show that he was listening.

Luke said, “I got him killed because I wanted to prove that I wasn’t a ‘small fry.’” He kicked at the sand. “It was stupid coming out here alone, and Huey paid for it.”

Adjusting Windy on his back, Ben replied, “My young friend, you have learned a valuable lesson about responsibility. Always keep this memory. Events in our lives have consequences that ripple through the lives of others.”

Luke gave Ben a sidelong glance, and Ben realized from the boy’s somewhat baffled expression that his words may have overwhelmed the boy. Ben added, “All life is connected.”

Luke seemed to think about this for a moment, then he nodded in agreement. Ben thought, *At least he listens.*

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As Ben felt his back begin to ache from the strain of carrying Windy, the wind started to pick up again. Ben jutted his bearded chin toward a looming butte, which resembled a silhouette of an enormous tree stump against the dark storm clouds. "I know a safe place up ahead," Ben said. "We'll take shelter there."

While the winds wailed outside Ben's old hovel, Luke and a recovered Windy sat inside with Ben. Ben had secured the hovel's camouflage door, and the boys were happy to share the rations that he offered. After swallowing a nutrient tablet, Luke asked politely, "How long have you lived on Tatooine, Mr. Kenobi?"

Ben stroked his beard as he replied, "Longer than some, I suppose, but not as long as others."

"Oh," Luke said, apparently not noticing that Ben hadn't even slightly answered his question. Eager to learn more, Luke continued, "Do you have family here?"

Ben shook his head. "Just myself."

"Huh," Luke said. "I live with my aunt and uncle. Beru and Owen Lars. You said you know them?"

Knowing that Luke might relate their conversation to Owen, Ben said cautiously, "I recall whereabouts they live, but I regret I never really got to know them. Not well, anyway."

Luke's eyes brightened as he replied, "I'm sure they'll be happy to see you, especially after Windy and I tell them how you helped us."

That would be pleasant, Ben thought, but he doubted that Owen would ever be entirely happy to see him.

"My parents will want to thank you, too," Windy chimed in. Ben just smiled in return.

"If you don't mind my asking," Luke continued, "what were you doing out in the Jundland Wastes tonight?"

Ben said, "That's where I live."

Luke gaped. "You *live* in the Wastes?" He and Windy exchanged astonished glances, then Luke returned his gaze to Ben and added, "All by yourself?"

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Ben gave a shrug, then said, “Well, a fellow has to live *somewhere*.”

“Don’t you get ever get lonesome?”

“Not at all. As long as I have the suns in the morning and the moons at night, I’m reasonably content.”

Windy said, “Do you live in a house, or a place like, um...?” Moving his hands, he gestured at the hovel’s interior.

Ben chuckled. “In fact, young Windy, I do live in a house.”

Luke said, “Maybe we could visit you some time, Mr. Kenobi?”

“I’d enjoy that very much,” Ben said. “But please, call me Ben.”

“Sure...Ben.”

“But before any of us go making more travel plans,” Ben said, “let us try to get some rest. We can talk more in the morning.”

Windy’s worried parents were already at the Lars homestead, standing beside Owen and Beru, when Ben arrived with the two boys. Owen was clutching his blaster rifle. Windy ran straight to his mother who wrapped her arms around him.

“This is Mr. Kenobi!” Windy gasped. “He saved us from a krayt dragon!”

Windy’s mother looked up to Ben and said, “Thank you, Mr. Kenobi!” Windy’s father patted his son on the back as he smiled gratefully at Ben.

Ben returned the smile sheepishly, then looked to Owen. Owen glowered at him.

Luke arrived at Beru’s side and exclaimed, “Mr. Kenobi told us stories about living out on the Dune Sea...it was great! Can he stay for a while?”

Without hesitation, Owen answered firmly, “Mr. Kenobi *has* to leave *now*.”

There was a moment of awkward silence. Then Beru, clearly outraged, glared at her husband and said, “Owen Lars!”

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Ignoring his wife, Owen stepped forward and grabbed Ben's upper arm. "I want you off my property," Owen said, "and don't come back!" He gave Ben a shove.

Ben stumbled back but instantly regained his balance. Looking away from Owen, he faced Luke. Ben had hoped to talk more with Luke, who looked positively stunned by Owen's behavior. Now, all Ben could manage was a slight, sad smile for Luke before he turned and walked away.

Back home to the Jundland Wastes.

Chapter Ten

One day, during Ben Kenobi's nineteenth year on Tatooine, he felt an overwhelming urge to go for a walk in the canyons of the Jundland Wastes. As much as he enjoyed walking for exercise, he couldn't explain why he felt so compelled on this particular day, but decided to follow his instincts.

He was just a few kilometers from his home when he sensed danger in the canyon up ahead. More precisely, he sensed *Luke* was in danger.

What's that boy doing out here? Ben knew that Luke owned a skyhopper and had gained a local reputation as a talented pilot, but he also knew that Owen had recently grounded Luke after a reckless race at Beggar's Canyon. Before Ben could further ponder why Luke was so far from home, he smelled something in the air. *Tusken Raiders!* There was no mistaking their scent.

Ben pulled his cloak up over his head and quickened his pace. As he rounded a bend in the canyon, he saw three Tusks rummaging through a landspeeder that was parked beside some large boulders. He recognized the speeder as Luke's, and then saw Luke himself lying motionless on the ground near the Tusks. It appeared they had knocked him out cold.

Without breaking his stride across the canyon's stony floor, Ben performed his best imitation of a krayt dragon's hunting cry.

Ryder Windham

The long, high-pitched howl echoed loudly off the canyon walls, prompting the Tusken to grab their weapons and flee, leaving Luke and the landspeeder behind.

Ben moved swiftly beside Luke's unconscious form, bent down, and checked Luke's pulse. As he confirmed Luke was all right, he heard an electronic moan to his right, followed by a short beep. Ben paused, then pulled back his hood and turned to his right to see a blue-domed astromech droid cowering in the shadows under a rocky ledge.

Goodness, Ben thought. *It looks just like R2-D2.* He smiled at the droid and said, "Hello there!" Wagging his fingers in a beckoning gesture, he encouraged, "Come here, my little friend. Don't be afraid."

The droid emitted a series of concerned-sounding beeps.

"Oh, don't worry," Ben said as he gestured to Luke, "he'll be all right."

Luke stirred, then slowly opened his dazed eyes to look up at Ben. Ben helped him rise to a sitting position. "Rest easy, son," Ben said, "you've had a busy day. You're fortunate to be all in one piece."

Luke rubbed the back of his head and then focused on his rescuer. "Ben?" he said. "Ben Kenobi? Boy, am I glad to see you!"

The astromech droid wobbled out from under the ledge and approached Luke and Ben.

"The Jundland Wastes are not to be traveled lightly," Ben said as he pulled Luke up to his feet. "Tell me, young Luke, what brings you out this far?"

"Oh, this little droid!" Luke said, gesturing at the astromech who beeped in response. Luke continued, "I think he's searching for his former master, but I've never seen such devotion in a droid before..."

Ben smiled again at the astromech, who beeped at him. Ben returned his gaze to Luke, who said, "Ah, he claims to be the

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property of an Obi-Wan Kenobi. Is he a relative of yours? Do you know who he's talking about?"

Ben's smile melted away. He kept his eyes on Luke and tried to remain calm, but the boy's words had practically stunned him. Catching his breath, Ben eased himself back to rest against a boulder. "*Obi-Wan* Kenobi..." he said. "Obi-Wan?" His gaze drifted to the ground. "Now that's a name I've not heard in a long time...a long time."

"I think my uncle knows him," Luke said. "He said he was dead...."

"Oh, he's not dead," Ben said, rolling his eyes with mild amusement. "Not yet."

"You know him?"

"Well, of course I know him. He's me!"

The astromech chirped as he rotated his dome to study Ben more closely.

Glancing at Luke, Ben said "I haven't gone by the name Obi-Wan since, oh, before you were born."

"Well, then, the droid *does* belong to you."

"Don't seem to remember ever owning a droid," Ben said, eyeing the blue astromech more carefully. As improbable as it seemed, he realized the droid *was* R2-D2. He recalled that R2-D2's counterpart, C-3PO, was supposed to have had a memory wipe, but he didn't know whether R2-D2 had undergone the same treatment, and thus wasn't certain if the droid even recognized him after so many years. *I've certainly aged more obviously than R2 has.* Ben kept his musings to himself, but muttered, "Very interesting..."

An inhuman braying sound echoed through the canyon. Ben looked up at the overhanging cliffs and said, "I think we better get indoors. The Sand People are easily startled, but they will soon be back. And in greater numbers."

Ben began moving toward the landspeeder and Luke followed, but then R2-D2 let out a pathetic beep, prompting Luke to exclaim, "C-3PO!"

Ryder Windham

What! Ben was astonished. *C-3PO is here, too?*

They found the protocol droid sprawled on some nearby rocks. Wires dangled out from the open socket at C-3PO's left shoulder, and his left arm lay on the ground a short distance away. Ben and Luke lifted the droid to a seated position.

In a dazed voice, C-3PO asked, "Where am I? I must have taken a bad step..." C-3PO turned his head from side to side, but when his photoreceptors saw Ben, he did not recognize the white-haired man.

"Well, can you stand?" Luke said. "We've got to get you out of here before the Sand People return."

"I don't think I can make it," C-3PO said. "You go on, Master Luke. There's no sense in you risking yourself on my account. I'm done for."

"No, you're not," Luke said sympathetically. "What kind of talk is that?"

Remembering the Tusken Raiders, Ben said, "Quickly...they're on the move."

Ben and Luke helped C-3PO to his feet, gathered up his left arm, and returned to the landspeeder. After they loaded the droids onto the vehicle, they sped off, heading out of the canyon and to the safety of Ben's house.

On the way back to the Ben's house, Luke explained how his uncle had bought the two droids from Jawa traders. After they arrived at the house, they went inside and Ben let Luke use his toolkit to repair C-3PO. Luke and C-3PO were seated on the couch beside a low round table across from Ben, who sat in a chair and watched as Luke quickly mended and reattached wires, and secured the droid's arm into place. R2-D2 stood near a storage chest on the floor and peered over the round table to watch the repair job.

The boy's as good at fixing things as his father was, Ben thought. Just then, R2-D2 beeped with what sounded like approval at Luke's

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technical skills, and Ben thought, *If you have any memory of Anakin, you're probably thinking the same thing.*

"Tell me, Luke," Ben said. "Do you know about your father's service in the Clone Wars?"

"No, my father didn't fight in the wars," Luke said as he reconnected another wire. "He was a navigator on a spice freighter."

"That's what your uncle told you," Ben said. "He didn't hold with your father's ideals. Thought he should have stayed here and not gotten involved."

Luke turned to face Ben. "You fought in the Clone Wars?"

"Yes. I was once a Jedi Knight, the same as your father," Ben said, easing back into his chair.

Luke looked away. "I wish I'd known him."

"He was the best starpilot in the galaxy and a cunning warrior." Ben paused and smiled at Luke. "I understand you've become quite a good pilot yourself."

Luke shrugged at this, but grinned sheepishly.

Ben smiled as he looked away. Remembering Anakin, he added, "And he was a good friend. Which reminds me..."

Ben pushed himself up from his seat and walked past R2-D2 to raise the lid on the storage chest. "I have something here for you." As he removed the shiny relic he had taken with him from the planet Mustafar, he said, "Your father wanted you to have this when you were old enough, but your uncle wouldn't allow it. He feared you might follow old Obi-Wan on some foolish idealistic crusade like your father did."

Still seated on the bed, C-3PO turned to Luke and said, "Sir, if you'll not be needing me, I'll close down for a while."

"Sure, go ahead," Luke said.

C-3PO remained seated as he switched himself off. His photoreceptors dimmed and his head slumped forward. Luke rose from the couch and stepped over beside Ben to see the object he had taken from the chest. Luke asked, "What is it?"

Ryder Windham

“Your father’s lightsaber,” Ben said, handing it to Luke. “This is the weapon of a Jedi Knight. Not as clumsy or random as a blaster.”

Luke’s fingers found the activation plate, and the lightsaber’s blade blazed to life. He appeared fascinated as he tested the weapon, listening to its hum as he moved the blade back and forth through the air.

“An elegant weapon for a more civilized age,” Ben commented as he returned to his chair. “For over a thousand generations the Jedi Knights were the guardians of peace and justice in the Old Republic. Before the dark times, before the Empire.”

Luke deactivated the lightsaber and carried it with him as he sat back down on the edge of the bed. Facing Ben, he asked, “How did my father die?”

Ben glanced away from Luke. Choosing his words carefully, he returned his gaze to Luke and said gravely, “A young Jedi named Darth Vader, who was a pupil of mine until he turned to evil, helped the Empire hunt down and destroy the Jedi Knights. He betrayed and murdered your father.”

Luke looked stunned.

“Now the Jedi are all but extinct,” Ben continued. “Vader was seduced by the dark side of the Force.”

“The Force?” Luke said.

“The Force is what gives the Jedi his power,” Ben said. “It’s an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together.”

R2-D2 beeped loudly, calling attention to himself.

Rising again, Ben stepped over to R2-D2 and said, “Now, let’s see if we can’t figure out what you are, my little friend. And where you come from.”

As Ben touched R2-D2’s dome, Luke said, “I saw part of the message he was—”

“I seem to have found it,” Ben interrupted, for R2-D2’s hologram projector had flicked on, causing a flickering hologram

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of a young, white-robed woman to appear atop Ben's round table. Ben returned to his seat.

"General Kenobi," said the woman's hologram, "years ago you served my father in the Clone Wars. Now he begs you to help him in his struggle against the Empire. I regret that I am unable to present my father's request to you in person, but my ship has fallen under attack, and I'm afraid my mission to bring you to Alderaan has failed. I have placed information vital to the survival of the Rebellion into the memory systems of this R2 unit."

Ben glanced at R2-D2, then back at the hologram.

"My father will know how to retrieve it," the woman's hologram continued. "You must see this droid safely delivered to him on Alderaan. This is our most desperate hour. Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi. You're my only hope."

The woman's hologram glanced over her right shoulder, then bent as if she were adjusting something. Watching the hologram's movement, Ben suspected she must have turned in response to someone or something behind her before she bent to manually switch off R2-D2's holorecorder. The hologram flickered off.

Ben sat back in his chair and tugged at his beard, thinking hard. *The compulsion to walk to the canyon, the reunion with the droids and Luke, and now this message.* Obi-Wan did not believe in such things as coincidence. *It must be by the will of the Force.*

Luke said, "Who is she?"

On the subject of the hologram, Ben knew it was best to keep details to a minimum. He kept his expression impassive as he said, "She is Princess Leia Organa of the Royal House of Alderaan, an Imperial Senator and, unbeknownst to the Empire, a leader of the Rebel Alliance. She's grown into a remarkable young woman." Turning to Luke, he said, "You must learn the ways of the Force if you're to come with me to Alderaan."

"Alderaan?" Luke said with disbelief. Rising away from Ben, he added, "I'm not going to Alderaan." He moved toward the

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door, nervously shifting his lightsaber from one hand to the other. "I've got to get home. It's late. I'm in for it as it is."

"I need your help, Luke," Ben said. Nodding his head toward the table that had displayed the hologram, he added, "*She* needs your help. I'm getting too old for this sort of thing."

"I can't get involved!" Luke protested. "I've got work to do! It's not that I like the Empire...I hate it! But there's nothing I can do about it right now. It's such a long way from here."

"That's your uncle talking."

Luke sighed. "Oh, boy, my uncle," he said as he clutched the lightsaber tight with his right hand. Raising his left hand over R2-D2's domed head, he said, "How am I ever gonna explain this?" He brought his hand down on top of the droid's head with a slight *whack*.

"Learn about the Force, Luke."

Luke moved anxiously toward the door again, then stopped and turned to Ben. "Look, I can take you as far as Anchorhead," he said. "You can get a transport there to Mos Eisley or wherever you're going."

Ben looked away from Luke and said, "You must do what you feel is right, of course."

"What I feel is right?" Luke said, exasperated. "Ben, I'd like to help you, to help *her*, but is it right to run out on Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru? They're all the family I've got, and I'm not going to let anything happen to them! If that's not right, then maybe I'd rather be wrong!"

Ben nodded his head. "Yes...of course. Sometimes even the best intentions may be contradictory. Perhaps your answer lies with the Force, within you." Rising from his chair, Ben said briskly, "Very well, I shall take you up on your kind offer. I must make my way to Alderaan as quickly as I can."

Ben wondered if Luke would change his mind about leaving Tatooine by the time they reached Anchorhead, but he could not sense anything of the future. *Events are moving too fast*, Ben thought. *And today, the will of the Force is just too strong to resist.*

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As Luke reactivated C-3PO, Ben discreetly secured his own lightsaber to his belt before donning his heavy robe. Suddenly, Ben realized that he might never return to his home in the desert, and that he had one thing left to do before leaving. Turning to Luke he said, “I think I might have an extra belt ring for your father’s lightsaber. May I have the lightsaber for a moment so I can make sure the ring fits?”

“Oh, sure,” Luke said, handing the lightsaber to Ben. “I’ll load the droids onto the speeder and meet you outside.”

As Luke and the droids headed out the door, Ben brought the lightsaber down into his cellar. He held the weapon carefully so he wouldn’t smudge the fingerprints Luke had left on it. Moving quickly to his workbench, he used a small scanning device to record Luke’s right thumbprint from the lightsaber, then transferred the print onto the access clasp for his journal. After placing the journal inside the boa-wood box, he transferred the same print onto the box’s clasp. He set the scanning tool aside, and thought *That’s that*. Remembering what he’d told Luke, he picked up a spare utility ring that he knew would fit the lightsaber. In less than two minutes, he was back upstairs and walking out the front door.

The droids and Luke were waiting for Ben at the landspeeder. As he climbed into the front seat beside Luke, he said, “Here you are,” and returned the lightsaber along with the extra belt ring.

“Thanks!” Luke said as he took the lightsaber and ring. Then he started the speeder and zoomed away from Ben’s home, heading southeast.

Ben never looked back.

“I really do wish I could do more for you, Ben,” Luke said as he guided the landspeeder along the edge of the Jundland Wastes. “But the sooner I get these droids out on the south ridge working on those vaporators, the less of a skinning I’ll catch from Uncle Owen.”

“Luke, I’m afraid the droids will have to come with me.”

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“What?” Luke exclaimed as he gave Ben a quick sidelong glance. “But they cost my uncle nearly—”

“Surely you don’t think I can leave them behind?” Ben interrupted. “You heard that message. This matter is too vital to risk losing Artoo-Detoo, and for security’s sake, See-Threepio must come along as well.”

“But what’ll I tell Uncle Owen?”

“I shall leave that to your conscience, son. But here’s another thing to consider: There will almost certainly be Imperial agents seeking these two droids, people of the most violent and ruthless sort. Taking them back to your farm would only expose your uncle and aunt to dreadful danger.”

“Oh,” Luke said. “Oh, yeah. I’ll...I’ll think of something, I guess.”

“Good,” Ben said. “I know you will.” Just then, he saw a rising smudge of darkness against the cliffs at the edge of the Wastes. He nudged Luke with his elbow as he pointed toward the cliffs and said, “Smoke!”

“What?” Luke followed Ben’s gaze. “Where? I don’t see any...yes! There it is! You’ve got good eyes for...uh, I mean...”

“...an old man?” Ben said with a grin. “Powers of observation lie with the mind, Luke, not the eyes. Perhaps we should take a look and see what it is.”

Luke steered toward the fire, and they soon arrived beside what was left of a Jawa sandcrawler. Smoke billowed from fires that still burned inside and around the bulky, rusted vehicle. Dozens of Jawas lay dead, their small forms scattered across the sand.

At Ben’s instruction, Luke stopped the landspeeder so they could examine the wreckage. The sandcrawler’s hull was riddled with blaster-fire damage, and it appeared the entire Jawa clan had been wiped out.

“It looks like the Sand People did this, all right,” Luke observed. Picking up a Tusken’s weapon from the ground, he

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said, "Look, there's gaffi sticks, bantha tracks. It's just...I never heard of them hitting anything this big before."

"They didn't," Ben said. "But we are meant to think they did." Gesturing at the bantha tracks, he continued, "These tracks are side by side. Sand People always ride single file to hide their numbers."

Luke studied the small corpses that lay at his feet. "These are the same Jawas that sold us Artoo-Detoo and See-Threepio."

Ben pointed at the scorched dents in the sandcrawler's hull. "And these blast points, too accurate for Sand People. Only Imperial stormtroopers are so precise."

"But why would Imperial troops want to slaughter Jawas?"

Ben did not reply as Luke's gaze traveled to R2-D2 and C-3PO, who stood next to the parked speeder. Stepping toward Ben, Luke said, "If they traced the robots here, they may have learned who they sold them to, and that would lead them back...home!"

Luke bolted for the landspeeder.

"Wait, Luke!" Ben shouted. "It's too dangerous!"

Ignoring Ben, Luke jumped into the landspeeder, punched the ignition, and sped away from the burning sandcrawler.

When the speeder was no longer in sight, Ben turned to face the two droids. C-3PO said, "Where's Master Luke going, sir?"

"That I cannot tell you," Ben replied. "It's tied in with a great many things to be determined now by the Force."

C-3PO appeared nervous as he shifted from one foot to the other. R2-D2 emitted a low, whimpering whistle.

Ben surveyed the slain Jawas. "The poor little creatures," he said. "Their lives were arduous and meager enough without being ended so brutally." Returning his gaze to the droids, he said, "We'll gather fuel and prepare a funeral pyre."

The suns were beginning to set and cast long shadows across the desert when Luke finally returned to the ruined sandcrawler. Ben watched Luke climb out of the speeder and walk past the

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droids. From Luke's anguished expression, Ben knew instantly that Owen and Beru were dead.

Ben's memory flashed to Anakin. Anakin had just turned twenty when he lost his mother on Tatooine, and now his nineteen-year-old son had lost his own surrogate parents on the same blasted planet. Recalling how Anakin had been transformed by his loss, and wondering if Luke might follow his father's path, Ben suppressed a shudder.

Eyes downcast, Luke staggered over to stand before Ben. Ben said, "There's nothing you could have done, Luke, had you been there. You'd have been killed, too, and the droids would now be in the hands of the Empire."

Luke lifted his gaze to Ben. "I want to come with you to Alderaan. There's nothing for me here now. I want to learn the ways of the Force and become a Jedi like my father."

Ben responded with a nod. He sensed Luke's sincerity, and hoped to teach him as much as he could. But then he thought again of Anakin...and Darth Vader. As much as he hoped Luke would become a Jedi, he was also determined to do everything in his power to make sure Luke would *not* become a Jedi like his father.

After the last Jawa had been placed on the pyre, the two men loaded the droids onto the landspeeder and drove off, heading east. Glancing up at the darkening sky, Luke said, "I'm afraid we won't reach Mos Eisley before dark."

Despite the urgency of their mission to Alderaan, Ben knew that both he and Luke required rest. The day had been extremely draining, mentally as well as physically. And because Imperial forces were now added to the list of perils on Tatooine, he also knew it was even more unwise to travel after sunset. He said, "We can be in Bestine soon enough. We'll find shelter there for the night."

Chapter Eleven

Leaving Bestine early the next morning, Ben, Luke, and the droids proceeded to Mos Eisley. On their way, Luke stopped his landspeeder on a high, craggy bluff that overlooked a wide canyon. The droids followed Luke and Ben to the edge of the bluff and gazed out over a wide, haphazard array of runways, landing pads, craterlike docking bays, and semi-domed structures that sprawled across the stark canyon floor.

“Mos Eisley spaceport,” Ben said. “You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy.” Glancing at Luke, he added, “We must be cautious.”

Ben and Luke got the droids onto the back of the landspeeder, and then the group resumed their journey.

Familiar with the route to Chalmun’s Cantina on the far side of the city, Ben directed Luke through the dusty, busy streets of Mos Eisley Spaceport. Traffic consisted of not only landspeeders and swoop bikes but large quadrupeds, including dewbacks and long-necked rontos. While Ben was not surprised to see the wide variety of life-forms and transport that flowed past them, he realized with some amusement that Luke was trying hard not to gawk.

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Approaching a congested intersection, Luke slowed the landspeeder to allow some pedestrians to pass. Suddenly, five white-armored stormtroopers emerged from the shadows of the buildings at the sides of the road. All carried blaster rifles. One stormtrooper—a squad leader with an orange pauldron over his right shoulder—waved at Luke, signaling him to pull over. Luke had driven straight into an Imperial checkpoint.

Ben noticed that the stormtroopers were looking at C-3PO and R2-D2, who were in plain view on the landspeeder's rear section. He glanced at Luke, who appeared extremely anxious as he clutched the speeder's steering wheel. Ben offered a reassuring smile to the boy, and then looked up at the squad leader who now loomed beside Luke's side of the speeder.

Facing Luke, the squad leader said, "How long have you had these droids?"

"About three or four seasons," Luke blurted out.

Keeping his eyes on the squad leader, Ben grinned affably and said, "They're up for sale if you want them."

Behind Luke, C-3PO trembled.

The squad leader said, "Let me see your identification."

In a calm, controlled tone, Ben said, "You don't need to see his identification."

The squad leader turned to his fellow stormtroopers and said, "We don't need to see his identification."

Ben said, "These aren't the droids you're looking for."

"These aren't the droids we're looking for," the squad leader repeated to the others.

Luke glanced at Ben, who gave him a slight, knowing nod. Ben returned his gaze to the squad leader and added, "He can go about his business."

The squad leader looked again to Luke and said, "You can go about your business."

"Move along," Ben said.

"Move along," echoed the squad leader, gesturing with his hand for Luke to proceed. "Move along."

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Luke drove the landspeeder away from the checkpoint. Ben directed him along a curving street, and then they parked in front of Chalmun's Cantina. The moment the speeder stopped, a Jawa trotted over and ran his small hands over the vehicle's hood. C-3PO muttered, "I can't abide those Jawas. Disgusting creatures."

Ben and Luke climbed out of the landspeeder. "Go on, go on," Luke said as he shooed the Jawa away. While C-3PO helped R2-D2 off the back of the landspeeder, Luke turned to Ben. "I can't understand how we got by those troops. I thought we were dead."

"The Force can have a strong influence on the weak-minded."

Luke glanced at the cantina's run-down exterior. "Do you really think we're going to find a pilot here that'll take us to Alderaan?"

"Well, most of the best freighter pilots can be found here," Ben said. "Only watch your step. This place can be a little rough."

"I'm ready for anything," Luke said.

Ben led Luke and the droids into the cantina. Like many buildings in Mos Eisley, the cantina was essentially a hole in the ground that was covered by a domed roof. Its interior was dark, and the air was filled with thick smoke and fast music. Beyond the entry lobby, an arched doorway led to a short flight of mud-packed steps that descended into a crowded room. A disheveled, middle-aged man with hardened features stood behind the U-shaped bar that dominated the room's center, and the walls were lined by small booths that offered some slight possibility for private conversations. Most of the patrons were aliens, as were the Bith musicians who performed at the bandstand to the right of the bar.

While Luke stood gawking in the entry lobby with the droids behind him, Ben stepped down and made his way over to the bar, where he found a human spacer with a drink already in his hand. "Excuse me, my friend," Ben said, "but I wonder if I might have a word with you."

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The spacer eyed Ben suspiciously and replied, "Well?"

Examining the design of the spacer's pressure suit, Ben continued, "You're a Corellian spacer, are you not?"

"What about it?"

"I'm in the market to charter a fast starship," Ben said, "and I've been told by those in the know that the Corellian vessels are among the very best."

"You heard right," the spacer replied. "Cept that Corellians aren't *among*; we are the *best*."

"Ah, splendid," Ben said, beaming. "And would you by any chance know of a starship that's available for hire?"

The spacer's shoulders seemed to sag within his suit. "If you'd've come in here yesterday, you could've had mine, but now I'm committed to a charter. I raise ship tonight."

Ben grimaced. "A pity," he said. "Perhaps you could recommend someone else?"

"Well, there aren't too many other Corellians in port just now, and anybody else'd just be a second-rater." Scratching his chin while thinking, the spacer said, "Let's see, now...Oh, yeah, there's the *Falcon*."

"*Falcon*?"

"The *Millennium Falcon*. Her skipper's Han Solo."

"And would this—Han Solo?—be available at present for a job?"

"Haw!" the spacer laughed, nearly spilling his drink. "I'd be surprised if he wasn't. Han ain't been doing so well lately. He was around here a little while ago. In fact, his first mate, Chewbacca, he's..." The spacer glanced to his left and continued, "He's right here."

Ben followed the spacer's gaze to see a hulking, fur-covered alien who had moved up beside the bar. Chewbacca was a male Wookiee, about 2.25 meters tall. An ammunition bandolier was wrapped around the Wookiee's shaggy torso, and a laser-firing bowcaster was slung over one arm. Ben smiled and thought, *I haven't seen a Wookiee in a long time.*

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Chewbacca nodded at Ben. The spacer stepped away from the bar so Ben could speak directly with the Wookiee.

Just then, Luke and C-3PO started down the steps from the lobby. A signal chimed behind them, and Ben heard the bartender bellow, “Hey, we don’t serve their kind here!”

Luke replied, “What?”

“Your droids,” the bartender said. “They’ll have to wait outside. We don’t want them here.”

Ben watched as Luke dismissed C-3PO, who turned to exit the bar with R2-D2. Assured that no harm had occurred, Ben returned his attention to the Wookiee while Luke moved to stand beside him at the bar. Facing Chewbacca, Ben said, “The *Millennium Falcon*, is that the name of your ship? I was told she’s fast.”

Chewbacca replied with a series of low barks and grunts. Fortunately, Ben understood enough of the Wookiee language to reply, “No, that will be more than satisfactory. I’m not looking for anything elaborate, Chewbacca, just quick passage to Alderaan—”

Before Ben could finish, Luke’s right shoulder bumped into his side. He turned to see Luke face-to-face with a surly Aqualish, a tusked humanoid alien with bulbous black eyes. The Aqualish spat out combatively, “Negola dewaghi wooldugger?!?”

Luke looked away from the Aqualish, trying to ignore him. Ben watched as the Aqualish took a step back, allowing room for another thug to move in. Ben thought, *Oh, bother.*

The Aqualish’s companion was a ghastly-looking man. The man’s right eye was blinded and the flesh around it severely scarred. His nose looked as if it had an unfortunate encounter with a meat shredder. He tapped Luke’s left shoulder—hard. Luke looked at the disfigured man, who gestured at the Aqualish before he leaned in close to Luke and snarled, “He doesn’t like you.”

Luke mumbled, “I’m sorry.”

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"I don't like you either," said the man. "You just watch yourself. We're wanted men. I have the death sentence on twelve systems."

Luke replied, "I'll be careful."

The man seized Luke's arm and snarled, "You'll be dead."

That's quite enough, Ben thought. Stepping away from Chewbacca, he moved behind Luke to face the disfigured man. Speaking calmly, Ben said, "This little one's not worth the effort. Come, let me get you something."

The disfigured man moved with alarming speed and strength, flinging Luke away from the bar. As Luke crashed into a nearby table, the man and the Aqualish reached for their blaster pistols.

"No blasters! No blasters!" the bartender shouted too late as he dropped behind the bar and the band stopped playing.

Ben's hand darted to his belt and he drew his lightsaber. The blade ignited and swept past the blaster-wielding criminals. The disfigured man fell back against the bar, a deep slash across his chest. The Aqualish screamed and his right arm—severed at the elbow—fell to the floor, still clutching the blaster.

Everyone in the cantina was silent. The entire fight was over in less than five seconds. The only sound to be heard was the hum of Ben's lightsaber. He stood his ground, holding his lightsaber out from his body as he stared at his two defeated opponents. Then he glanced out across the room. If anyone else had been looking for a fight, the look in Ben's eyes was enough to discourage them.

Ben deactivated his lightsaber. Almost immediately, the band started playing again, and the patrons went back to their drinks and conversations. It was business again as usual in the Mos Eisley cantina.

Chewbacca followed Ben over to Luke, who remained sprawled on the floor. As Ben reached down to help Luke up, Luke said, "I'm all right,"

Ben nodded at the Wookiee and said to Luke, "Chewbacca here is first mate on a ship that might suit us."

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Chewbacca moved off to briefly confer with his captain, then guided Ben and Luke around the bar to a booth that had a circular table with a cylindrical light at its center. The booth was against the wall opposite the band, so they would be able to converse without shouting. The booth also offered a clear view of the entry lobby. Chewbacca sat with his back to the wall so he could watch the entry. Ben and Luke sat with their backs to the bar and faced Chewbacca.

They were soon joined by a tall, lean man with dark hair. The man wore a white shirt with a black vest, pants, and boots. As the man moved past the table, Ben noticed he had a blaster pistol in a quick-draw holster against his right thigh.

The man sat down beside Chewbacca, pointed to himself and said, "Han Solo. I'm captain of the *Millennium Falcon*. Chewie here tells me you're looking for passage to the Alderaan system."

"Yes, indeed," Ben said. "If it's a fast ship."

"Fast ship?" Han said, sounding offended. "You've never heard of the *Millennium Falcon*?"

Ben asked, "Should I have?"

"It's the ship that made the Kessel run in less than twelve parsecs!"

Ben was not impressed with such obvious misinformation, and gave Han a look that said as much.

Han continued, "I've outrun Imperial starships, not the local bulk cruisers, mind you. I'm talking about the big Corellian ships now. She's fast enough for you, old man. What's the cargo?"

"Only passengers," Ben said. "Myself, the boy, two droids, and no questions asked."

Han grinned broadly. "What is it? Some kind of local trouble?"

Ben said, "Let's just say we'd like to avoid any Imperial entanglements."

Narrowing his gaze on Ben, Han said, "Well, that's the real trick, isn't it? And it's going to cost you something extra." His eyes flicked to Luke. "Ten thousand, all in advance."

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“Ten thousand?” Luke gasped. “We could almost buy our own ship for that!”

Han raised his eyebrows. “But who’s going to fly it, kid? You?”

“You bet I could,” Luke said angrily. “I’m not such a bad pilot myself!” He looked to Ben and started to rise. “We don’t have to sit here and listen—”

Ben touched Luke’s arm, urging him to remain seated. Then Ben returned his gaze to Solo and said, “We can pay you two thousand now, plus fifteen when we reach Alderaan.”

Han did the math. “Seventeen, huh?”

Ben nodded.

Han thought about the offer for a few seconds, keeping his steely eyes locked on Ben. “Okay,” Han said. “You guys got yourselves a ship. We’ll leave as soon as you’re ready. Docking Bay Ninety-four.”

“Ninety-four,” Ben repeated.

Han looked past Ben to the bar and said, “Looks like somebody’s beginning to take an interest in your handiwork.”

Ben glanced at Luke, who turned to look at the bartender. Ben heard the bartender mutter something, then the stormtrooper’s digitized voice replied, “All right, we’ll check it out.”

Facing Ben, Han said, “I suggest the backdoor, gents. Right over there.” He tilted head slightly in the direction of the door.

By the time the stormtroopers arrived at Han and Chewbacca’s table, Ben and Luke were gone. Outside the cantina, Ben raised his hood to cover his head as they walked fast for where they’d parked the landspeeder. C-3PO and R2-D2 stood beside the vehicle, waiting for them.

Ben considered Han’s fee, then said to Luke, “You’ll have to sell your speeder.”

“That’s okay,” Luke said as they neared the droids. “I’m never coming back to this planet again.”

Interlude

“Tell me something, Artoo,” Luke said as he worked on the components for his new lightsaber. “Did you ever think we’d wind up back on Tatooine again?”

The astromech droid was standing on the other side of the living area inside Ben’s hut, and responded to Luke’s question with a scathing beep. Then R2-D2 opened a slot beneath his domed head and loudly ejected some sand that had found its way into his cylindrical body.

“Yeah, that’s how I feel, too,” Luke replied. Although his life had changed dramatically in the past three years, and although he had a reason for returning to Tatooine, he still felt like something of a failure now, as if all his accomplishments had led him back to where he’d started from. He had sincerely believed on the day that he had left Tatooine on the Millennium Falcon with Ben that he would never set foot on the sand planet again.

In fact, after Luke had boarded the Millennium Falcon with Ben and the droids, he hadn’t been sure whether he would ever set foot on any planet again. First, a squad of stormtroopers had tried to stop the Falcon from leaving its docking bay at Mos Eisley, and then, as the Falcon raced away from Tatooine, it had drawn fire from a blockade of Imperial Star Destroyers. Fortunately, Han Solo had managed to evade and escape the blockade by launching the incredibly durable Falcon into hyperspace,

But after the Falcon emerged from hyperspace, Luke’s group had immediately discovered that their destination, Alderaan, no longer existed.

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They were still pondering what could have caused the destruction of an entire planet when Solo began pursuit of a passing Imperial TIE fighter, which had led them directly toward a moon-sized battle station. Luke had been genuinely frightened when he first saw the Death Star. And when the Falcon was captured by the Death Star's tractor beam, he had thought that they were all goners.

But Ben had remained calm as he quickly improvised a plan to infiltrate the battle station. He had instructed Han Solo to jettison some of the Falcon's escape pods and make an entry in the ship's log, claiming in the entry that the crew abandoned ship right after takeoff. Then Ben had instructed Luke, Han, Chewbacca, and the droids to hide within the ship's sensor-proofed concealed compartments, which Han had previously used for smuggling.

After the tractor beam had deposited the Falcon into a Death Star hangar, Han and Chewbacca subdued a scanning crew and two stormtroopers. Luke and Han had then disguised themselves in the fallen stormtroopers' armor, which allowed the group to sneak into a nearby control room. Once inside, R2-D2 had accessed a computer outlet to gain data on how to shut down power to the tractor beam and allow the Falcon to escape.

Ben had insisted on going to the tractor-beam power coupling alone.

To this day, Luke wondered if Ben ever had any idea that he wouldn't be leaving the Death Star on the Millennium Falcon.

Chapter Twelve

Inside the control room that overlooked Docking Bay 327, the hangar that held the captive *Millennium Falcon*, Ben rapidly studied the schematics for the power generator terminal that R2-D2 had displayed on a viewscreen. The terminal was located in sector six of the spherical battle station's northern hemisphere. Instantly memorizing the location, Ben turned to Luke and Han and said, "I don't think you boys can help. I must go alone."

"Whatever you say," Han replied as Ben headed for the door. "I've done more than I bargained for on this trip already."

Ben had just reached the door when he was stopped by Luke, who said, "I want to go with you."

"Be patient, Luke," Ben said. "Stay and watch over the droids."

Gesturing to Han, Luke said, "But he can—"

"They must be delivered safely or other star systems will suffer the same fate as Alderaan," Ben interrupted. "Your destiny lies along a different path from mine." He pressed a button on the doorway, and the door slid fast up into the ceiling. Facing Luke, he added, "The Force will be with you...always!"

Ben left the command office and moved down the corridor. A moment later, he heard the door slide shut behind him. Although he was reluctant to leave Luke alone with the brash Han Solo, he

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believed Luke would remain safe if he stayed where he was, at least until the tractor beam's power was deactivated.

He also believed it was best to put some distance between himself and Luke, because he knew something that the boy didn't. Shortly after they had arrived within the battle station's hangar, while still hiding within the *Falcon's* smuggling compartment, Ben had sensed a most particular presence.

Darth Vader.

Ben knew that if he had sensed Vader, it was most likely that the Dark Lord had sensed him, too. Ben was not afraid of confronting Vader again, but he didn't even want to think about what would happen to Luke if he failed to shut down the tractor beam.

Ben was careful to avoid detection as he made his way through the battle station's maze of corridors and lift tubes. Moving stealthily from a lateral transport to a long, empty corridor, he clung to the shadows until he finally arrived at his destination: a narrow bridge that spanned a wide, deep shaft that delivered him to the tractor beam power terminal, a cylindrical structure that stood atop a thirty-five-kilometer-tall generator tower.

A narrow ledge wrapped around the terminal. Ben stepped carefully onto the ledge and moved around the power terminal until he could reach the generator controls. He pressed one lever, then edged further around the terminal until he found the controls for the tractor beam power coupling.

He heard footsteps approach. Ben maneuvered his body around the terminal to conceal himself from a detachment of stormtroopers as they crossed the shaft-spanning bridge. Two stormtroopers remained behind while the others proceeded.

After Ben readjusted the generator controls and confirmed that the tractor beam was disabled, he used the Force to make the two remaining stormtroopers think they heard a muffled explosion. While the stormtroopers were distracted, Ben stepped back onto the bridge, then moved quickly away from the

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terminal. He darted into another corridor, and began making his way back to the control room to rejoin his allies.

Ben eventually arrived at the battle station's equatorial area, and then to the same level as Docking Bay 327. He was moving through a corridor when he heard more stormtroopers approach, and he ducked into a dark alcove. As the stormtroopers passed his position, one trooper commented, "We think they may be splitting up. They may be on levels five and six now, sir."

Splitting up? Ben wasn't certain, but he suspected that the stormtrooper was referring to Luke and the others. All he could do was hope that Luke was all right.

Once the stormtroopers were gone, Ben emerged from the alcove and drew his lightsaber from his belt. He did not activate the blade but held it ready. He had a feeling he would be using his weapon sooner than later, and he had a feeling he would be using it against Vader.

Ever since he had first sensed Vader's presence on the battle station, he had become increasingly certain that Vader knew he was on board. He had even allowed the possibility that Vader had let him deactivate the tractor beam, all in an effort to lure him into a trap. Ben had no fear of whatever Vader might have in store for him, but he still had to do everything in his power to make sure Luke would escape safely.

If Ben failed that, he believed all his years on Tatooine would have been for nothing, and all *would* be lost.

He proceeded through the corridor, but with less caution. For now he knew he was destined to encounter Vader, and that it would be their final reunion.

Ben was still clutching his lightsaber when he reached an access tunnel that led back to Docking Bay 327. As he entered the tunnel, he sighted a tall, shadowy form at the tunnel's other end. Even if Ben had never seen Darth Vader's cybernetic incarnation via a HoloNet broadcast on Tatooine, he still would

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have sensed the power of his former apprentice, now concealed within black armor.

Vader had already activated the red blade of his lightsaber. For a moment, he stood as still as a statue. Then he moved forward, his black cape sweeping behind him as he practically glided across the tunnel's floor toward Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Obi-Wan activated his lightsaber and stepped slowly forward. He'd fought Vader before, and he hadn't been afraid then, either. As Vader drew closer, Obi-Wan thought with morbid amusement, *He's taller than I remember.*

"I've been waiting for you, Obi-Wan," Vader said as he stepped even closer. "We meet again, at last. The circle is now complete."

Obi-Wan angled his lightsaber to assume an offensive position.

Vader continued, "When I left you, I was but the learner; now I am the master."

"Only a master of evil, Darth," Obi-Wan said. He used Vader's Sith Lord title mockingly, as if he were addressing an unfortunately named child. He had hoped the insult might catch Vader off guard, and followed with a sudden lunge, but Vader easily blocked it with his own weapon. There was a loud electric crackle as the blades made contact.

Obi-Wan swung again and again, and Vader parried each strike.

Vader said, "Your powers are weak, old man,"

Although Obi-Wan could only imagine what was left of Vader's features behind the black mask, he somehow suspected that Vader was smiling. "You can't win, Darth," Obi-Wan said. "If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine."

"You should not have come back."

Their lightsabers clashed again and again. And as their battle continued, they moved closer to the main doorway that led directly to the *Millennium Falcon's* hangar.

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Obi-Wan risked a glance through the hangar's open doorway and saw four stormtroopers guarding the *Falcon*. He also sensed that Luke was nearby. Hoping to cause a distraction that would allow Luke to board the *Falcon*, he attacked Vader more vigorously. The noise of clashing lightsabers echoed into the hangar, attracting the stormtroopers' attention.

With his peripheral vision, Obi-Wan saw the stormtroopers leave their stations beside the *Falcon* and run toward him and Vader. He continued his attack on Vader, and several exchanges later, he sensed Luke's movement and knew his plan had worked. He risked another glance into the hangar to see several figures racing for the *Falcon*'s landing ramp: the droids, Chewbacca, Han Solo, Luke, and—*Leia*!

Obi-Wan hadn't known that Princess Leia was on the battle station, but he recognized the girl in the white dress from the hologram that R2-D2 had displayed. Obi-Wan did not believe in luck or coincidences, and seeing Luke unwittingly reunited with his twin sister, he knew that it was not a tractor beam that had brought him to the battle station, but the will of the Force.

His fleeting glance also registered that Luke had paused behind his friends. Luke stood a short distance from the landing ramp and was staring straight at him, gaping.

Obi-Wan realized there was only one way Luke, Leia, and the others would escape the battle station alive. He smiled as he looked away from Luke, then closed his eyes and raised his lightsaber up before him.

Darth Vader did not hesitate to strike.

Interlude

Luke Skywalker recalled the last moment he saw Ben alive, fighting Darth Vader on the Death Star. Ben had glanced at him from across the hangar, and then closed his eyes as he turned to face Vader. Vader's lightsaber cut right through Ben's robes, Ben's body had vanished...

And then he told me to run!

Luke didn't know if he would ever completely understand the Force, but he was relieved to know that somehow, it had kept Ben alive. Ben's voice—his spirit—had aided Luke when he'd flown his X-wing starfighter on the mission to destroy the Death Star. Without Ben's help, Luke doubted he ever could have accomplished that.

Luke had not yet finished reading Ben's journal, and wondered if he'd find anything in it about Jedi spirits. Do all Jedi become spirits like Ben? Or was it something Ben learned how to do on his own? Luke had no idea.

And again, he found himself wishing Ben were there to answer his questions.

Chapter Thirteen

Thanks to the teachings of Qui-Gon Jinn, Obi-Wan Kenobi was one with the Force.

Where he had been once but an isolated drop of water in a great sea, he was now the sea itself. It was a sea that had no surface or floor, which flowed everywhere and through everything. The Force transcended time and space. Civilizations would rise and fall, stars would form and die, but the Force would never end.

As a spiritual entity, Obi-Wan was not hampered by the laws of physics. He could travel across the galaxy from one world to another by merely thinking of the journey. He could not only communicate with the living but manifest an illusion of his former physical self. He could even communicate with fellow spirits, should they be mutually inclined.

After the destruction of the Death Star, Obi-Wan limited his communication with Luke Skywalker. This was not because Obi-Wan's powers would have been in any way diminished by further communication, but because he knew that there were a great many things that Luke could learn only from the living—not only his friends but his enemies as well. More precisely, there were things Luke had to learn for himself, and sometimes on his own. Ben was a *guiding* spirit, not a meddling one.

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But Obi-Wan's spirit always remained watchful. After Luke accidentally became catatonic while attempting to use the Force to meditate, Obi-Wan entered Luke's dreams and guided him to conquer his innate fear of Darth Vader. And when the very unprepared Luke and Leia—still unaware of the fact that they were siblings—actually confronted Vader on Mimban, Obi-Wan again intervened, bolstering Luke's abilities to help him defeat the Dark Lord.

Vader should have died on Mimban, Obi-Wan thought ruefully. Just as he should have died on Mustafar, Yavin, and more places than I can name.

And yet Darth Vader lived.

As powerful as Obi-Wan was in spirit, he had no influence over the Sith Lords. In fact, to be anywhere near their proximity was a draining experience for any entity.

And there were other dangers to consider. Yoda had told him that ancient Sith Lords had at least once developed a weapon called the Thought Bomb to destroy Jedi and capture their souls. Obi-Wan did not know whether Palpatine or Vader possessed or were capable of creating a Thought Bomb or if such a weapon could consume an already existing spirit, but he knew that if he allowed himself to be lured into any Sith-set trap, he would be of little use to Luke.

It was three years after the Battle of Yavin, when the Rebel Alliance had relocated to the ice planet Hoth, that Ben manifested himself as a vision to Luke. Luke had escaped the clutches of a bloodthirsty wampa on his own, but he was also injured and lost, far from the Rebel base. Exhausted by his struggle to survive and by the sub-freezing winds that tore at him from all directions, Luke collapsed against the hard, snow-covered ground.

Obi-Wan spoke. "Luke...Luke."

Slowly, Luke raised his head as if it were a massive weight. Obi-Wan appeared as a shimmering, spectral form a short distance in front of him. Obi-Wan could see in Luke's confused

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expression that he was wondering whether he was hallucinating. Luke said aloud, “Ben?”

Ben said, “You will go to the Dagobah system.”

“Dagobah system?” Luke repeated, still confused.

“There you will learn from Yoda,” Obi-Wan continued, “the Jedi Master who instructed me.”

Luke groaned. “Ben...Ben.”

Obi-Wan knew that Luke was in shock. But he also knew that help would arrive within seconds, in the form of Han Solo riding a tauntaun. Han Solo would believe that he had arrived upon Luke’s position by pure luck, but it was Obi-Wan who had steered Han’s mount to the north of the wampa’s ice cave.

Obi-Wan dematerialized just a moment before Han arrived upon Luke.

Obi-Wan’s spirit monitored Luke’s recovery in the bacta tank at the Rebel base, and through the terrible battle at Hoth. When the Rebels were forced to evacuate, he watched Luke’s progress. He did not intervene when Luke crash-landed his X-wing into the Dagobah swamp—Obi-Wan did not want Luke to leave before his training was complete.

Obi-Wan was a secret witness to the moment Luke unknowingly met Yoda, who was reluctant to introduce himself until he was convinced of Luke’s conviction to study the ways of the Jedi. Obi-Wan even watched with some amusement as Yoda offered to take Luke to meet “the Jedi Master” he sought, only to bring Luke to his own low-ceilinged hut under the large roots of an ancient tree.

Addressing Luke as he prepared some food in a steaming pot, Yoda said, “Why wish you become Jedi? Hm?”

“Mostly because of my father, I guess,” Luke replied.

“Ah, father,” Yoda said with interest. “Powerful Jedi was he, mmm, powerful Jedi, mmm.”

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“Oh, come on!” Luke said angrily. “How could you know my father? You don’t even know who I am. Oh, I don’t know what I’m doing here. We’re wasting our time.”

Yoda looked away from Luke and leaned his weight onto the gimer stick that he used as a walking staff. Obi-Wan sensed the aged Jedi Master’s disappointment even before he said, “I cannot teach him. The boy has no patience.”

“He will learn patience,” Obi-Wan said aloud, his voice echoing slightly within the hut.

Startled by the disembodied voice, Luke glanced around the hut, searching for Obi-Wan.

“Hmmm,” muttered Yoda. He turned slowly to face Luke. Speaking to Obi-Wan, he said, “Much anger in him, like his father.”

Obi-Wan’s voice replied, “Was I any different when you taught me?”

“Hah,” Yoda said. “He is not ready.”

Luke finally stopped looking for Obi-Wan and looked into his host’s wise old eyes. Luke gasped, “Yoda!”

Yoda nodded.

“I *am* ready,” Luke protested. “I...Ben! I...I can be a Jedi. Ben, tell him I’m ready.” Luke started to get up, only to smack his head in the hut’s ceiling.

“Ready, are you?” Yoda said with disdain. “What know you of ready? For eight hundred years have I trained Jedi. My own counsel will I keep on who is to be trained! A Jedi must have the deepest commitment, the most serious mind.” Tilting his head back to address the invisible Obi-Wan, Yoda continued, “This one a long time have I watched. All his life has he looked away...to the future, to the horizon. Never his mind on where he was. Hmm? What he was doing. Hmph.” He raised his gimer stick and jabbed Luke. “Adventure. Heh! Excitement. Heh! A Jedi craves not these things.” Then he lowered his gimer stick, glared at Luke and said, “You are reckless!”

Obi-Wan said, “So was I, if you remember.”

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“He is too old,” Yoda said firmly. “Yes, too old to begin training.”

Luke said desperately, “But I’ve learned so much.”

Yoda sighed. Again addressing Obi-Wan’s spirit, he asked, “Will he finish what he begins?”

Luke did not wait for Obi-Wan’s answer, and said, “I won’t fail you.”

Yoda returned his gaze to Luke, who added, “I’m not afraid.”

“Oh,” Yoda said, his eyes widening slightly. Lowering his voice to a threatening tone, he said, “You will be. You *will* be.”

Luke’s training was brutal. Not just the obstacle courses that had him climbing vines and leaping through the swamp with Yoda secured to his back, but also the meditation exercises to open himself to the Force. Luke obeyed Yoda’s every instruction and never broke down.

Obi-Wan’s spirit silently watched Luke’s progress as the young man tackled every challenge. *Every day, he’s getting stronger*, Obi-Wan thought.

Still, Luke was limited by his self-doubts, and his impulse to confront danger. He had entered a cave that was inexplicably strong with the dark side of the Force, only to have a nightmarish confrontation with an apparition of Darth Vader. He had refused to believe the Force could be used to elevate his sinking X-wing until Yoda showed him that it *was* possible. Even more crippling were his fears, especially after meditation had yielded a vision of the future, of a city in the clouds, where his friends Leia and Han would meet with pain.

“I’ve got to go to them,” Luke said.

Yoda sighed. “Decide you must how to serve them best. If you leave now, help them you could. But you would destroy all for which they have fought and suffered.”

And yet Luke decided to leave Dagobah. As darkness fell, Luke put on his orange flight suit and checked his gear while R2-D2 positioned himself into the X-wing’s astromech socket.

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“Luke!” said Yoda, watching from a nearby knoll. “You must complete the training.”

“I can’t keep the vision out of my head,” Luke replied as he hastily inspected his ship. “They’re my friends. I’ve got to help them.”

“You must not go!” Yoda said desperately.

Luke faced Yoda and said, “But Han and Leia will die if I don’t.”

“You don’t know that,” replied the disembodied voice of Obi-Wan’s spirit. *If Yoda can’t convince Luke to stay, perhaps I can.*

Turning in response to Obi-Wan’s voice, Luke watched as a slightly shimmering light began to glow in the air behind Yoda. Then the light materialized into the form of Obi-Wan, who said gravely, “Even Yoda cannot see their fate.”

“But I can help them!” Luke said. “I feel the Force!”

“But you cannot control it,” Obi-Wan said. “This is a dangerous time for you, when you will be tempted by the dark side of the Force.”

Yoda said, “Yes, yes. To Obi-Wan you listen. The cave. Remember your failure at the cave!”

“But I’ve learned so much since then, Master Yoda,” Luke said as he returned his attention to his X-wing. “I promise to return and finish what I’ve begun. You have my word.”

Obi-Wan said, “It is you and your abilities the Emperor wants. That is why your friends are made to suffer.”

“That’s why I have to go,” Luke said.

“Luke,” Obi-Wan said, “I don’t want to lose you to the Emperor the way I lost Vader.” To himself, Obi-Wan added, *The way I lost Anakin.*

“You won’t,” Luke said.

Yoda said, “Stopped they must be. On this all depends. Only a fully trained Jedi Knight with the Force as his ally will conquer Vader and his Emperor.” As Luke stowed the last of his gear onto the X-wing, Yoda continued, “If you end your training now,

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if you choose the quick and easy path, as Vader did, you will become an agent of evil.”

“Patience,” Obi-Wan said with emphasis, hoping Luke would carry the word with him.

“And sacrifice Han and Leia?” Luke snapped. He was anything but patient.

Yoda answered, “If you honor what they fight for...yes!”

Luke reached for the lower rung of the X-wing’s retractable ladder and looked away from Obi-Wan and Yoda. Obi-Wan said, “If you choose to face Vader, you will do it alone. I cannot interfere.”

“I understand,” Luke muttered. Then he climbed the ladder to the starfighter’s open cockpit and said, “Artoo, fire up the converters.”

As the X-Wing’s engines fired up, Obi-Wan said, “Luke, don’t give in to hate—that leads to the dark side.”

“Strong is Vader,” Yoda added. “Mind what you have learned. Save you it can.”

“I will,” Luke said as he pulled on his helmet. “And I’ll return. I promise.” The cockpit canopy lowered, and the X-wing lifted off from the ground and ascended into the night sky.

As Yoda raised his gaze to watch the departing X-Wing, Obi-Wan’s luminous apparition faded into the darkness. Yoda sighed, looked down at the ground, and shook his head sadly. “Told you, I did,” he said. “Reckless is he. Now matters are worse.”

Obi-Wan’s disembodied voice said, “That boy is our last hope.”

Yoda returned his gaze to the sky and said, “No. There is another.”

Obi-Wan knew Yoda was speaking of Luke’s sister, Leia. Although Leia shared Luke’s bloodline and was certainly strong-willed, and although Obi-Wan had always respected Yoda’s beliefs, he somehow remained convinced that only one person could defeat the Sith Lords, and that person was Luke.

Chapter Fourteen

Luke Skywalker made the final adjustments to his new lightsaber. He was sitting at the table in the living area of Ben Kenobi's hut on Tatooine. Ben's journal rested on the table, its pages opened to the section on lightsabers. R2-D2 stood across the room, silently watching Luke.

I wish Ben were here, Luke thought absently, and not just because he had questions about Darth Vader. Sometimes, he just missed Ben.

Ben's spirit had not communicated with him since Dagobah, which did not surprise Luke. After all, Luke had ignored Ben and Yoda's cautions, and had gone directly to the Bespin system, and straight into Darth Vader's trap.

Ben had been good to his word. When Luke chose to face Darth Vader, Ben's spirit had done nothing to interfere. In hindsight, Luke realized that Ben and Yoda were right, that he should have stayed on Dagobah, for he accomplished very little by going to Cloud City.

I didn't stop Boba Fett from taking Han. I only endangered Leia and the others when they circled back to Cloud City to get me. I didn't rescue any of my friends. They rescued me!

And what did I accomplish? All he could think of was his confrontation with Vader, not just that he had survived the duel

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but that he had gained some information. As for the value of that devastating information...

Is Vader really my father?

Again, Luke felt the phantom pain at his right wrist.

R2-D2 saw Luke staring blankly at nothing in particular, and the droid chirped in concern.

Luke looked up at R2-D2 and said, "Don't worry, I'm fine." Returning his attention to the lightsaber, he added, "Well, I guess I'd better test it." He got up, carrying the lightsaber as he headed for the door. The astromech droid followed him outside.

It was early evening, with only a few stars visible in the sky. Luke held the lightsaber in his right hand. He was nervous. Even though he had followed Ben's instructions to the letter, and had checked and re-checked every part of the lightsaber during its construction, he still allowed the possibility that the weapon might explode. It was this uncertainty that had prompted him to test the weapon outside. If it *did* explode, he didn't want to destroy Ben's house along with it.

Watching Luke, R2-D2 beeped anxiously, and then extended a manipulator arm in his direction.

"You're offering to test my lightsaber?"

R2-D2 whistled affirmatively.

"Thanks, Artoo, but I wouldn't be much of a Jedi if I let you or anyone else do that."

R2-D2 retracted his manipulator and trembled, kicking up dirt.

"Go back inside," Luke ordered.

R2-D2 protested with a loud, blurring noise.

"Go on," Luke said. "If something happens, I need you to tell Leia." Luke thought, *Yeah. Tell her Luke, the galaxy's biggest idiot, flash-flamed himself into a black crisp because he couldn't follow an elementary circuit diagram.*

R2-D2 stomped off back to the house, protesting all the way.

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Luke relaxed and let his breath out. He waited until R2 had entered the house, then took another deep breath, held it, and pressed the lightsaber's activation plate.

VMMMMM—!

The lightsaber's gleaming green blade extended to its full length, just under a meter. Luke moved it back and forth through the air, listening to it hum.

Luke released his held breath. He hadn't *really* expected the lightsaber to explode, but was still relieved that it hadn't. The weapon felt comfortable in his hand, even better balanced than his previous lightsaber.

But will it cut? Luke walked over to a thin spire of rock that jutted up from the dry ground. He swept the blade down at an angle through the top of the rock. He felt no resistance as the blade traveled through the rock, but there was a loud crack as the rock separated and the top piece slid down the smooth surface of the angled cut.

Holding the lightsaber, Luke felt grateful to Ben for having left his journal behind. *I never would have gotten this far without Ben*, Luke thought. And then, because he had learned that lightsaber construction was a rite of passage for a Jedi, he wondered, *Am I a Jedi now?*

Luke was unaware that Obi-Wan's spirit, even now, could hear his thoughts.

Obi-Wan's spirit knew that Luke had to complete one final task before he could call himself a Jedi.

Liberating Han Solo from Jabba the Hutt wasn't easy, but Luke Skywalker and his allies pulled it off. Part of their daring rescue plan had included R2-D2 smuggling Luke's new lightsaber into Jabba's palace and delivering it to Luke when a signal was given. The plan had worked extremely well.

Immediately after the rescue, Luke returned with R2-D2 to Dagobah. Luke had hoped to resume his training with Yoda, but

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by the time they arrived on the swamp world, the aged Jedi Master was close to death.

Luke was with Yoda when he died. Night had fallen, and Yoda had been lying under blankets on his small bed when he breathed his last. Just seconds later, Luke watched as Yoda's body dematerialized and vanished. After 900 years, Yoda had finally become one with the Force.

But moments before he died, Yoda confirmed the truth about Darth Vader. Vader *was* Luke's father, and only by confronting him again could Luke become a Jedi. Yoda also disclosed that there existed another Skywalker.

Leaving Yoda's hut, Luke stepped out into the darkness and readied his X-wing to leave Dagobah. But then he looked to R2-D2 and said, "I can't do it, Artoo. I can't go on alone."

It was then that Obi-Wan chose to speak: "Yoda will always be with you."

Luke turned. "Obi-Wan!"

Obi-Wan's shimmering apparition materialized before a nearby grove of trees. He moved away from the trees to stand facing Luke.

Advancing toward Obi-Wan's spirit, Luke said, "Why didn't you tell me? You told me Vader betrayed and murdered my father."

"Your father was seduced by the dark side of the Force," Obi-Wan replied. "He ceased to be Anakin Skywalker and became Darth Vader. When that happened, the good man who was your father was destroyed. So what I told you was true...from a certain point of view."

"A certain point of view?" Luke echoed. The look on his face made it clear to Obi-Wan that he found the words distasteful.

"Luke, you're going to find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our own point of view." Obi-Wan shifted his apparition, easing himself to sit on the moss-covered trunk of a fallen tree. "Anakin was a good friend."

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Luke sat down beside Obi-Wan's apparition. Obi-Wan continued, "When I first knew him, your father was already a great pilot. But I was amazed how strongly the Force was with him. I took it upon myself to train him as a Jedi. I thought that I could instruct him just as well as Yoda. I was wrong."

"There is still good in him," Luke said.

Unconvinced, Obi-Wan said dismissively, "He's more machine now than man. Twisted and evil."

Luke shook his head. "I can't do it, Ben."

"You cannot escape your destiny. You must face Darth Vader again."

"I can't kill my own father."

Obi-Wan looked away from Luke. "Then the Emperor has already won," he said with a sigh. "You were our only hope."

"Yoda spoke of another."

Obi-Wan returned his gaze to Luke. "The other he spoke of is your twin sister."

Luke looked baffled. "But I have no sister."

"To protect you both from the Emperor, you were hidden from your father when you were born. The Emperor knew, as I did, if Anakin were to have any offspring, they would be a threat to him. That is the reason why your sister remains safely anonymous."

Luke's eyes went wide with realization. "Leia!" he said. "Leia's my sister."

"Your insight serves you well," Obi-Wan said. Making sure Luke had his complete attention, Obi-Wan continued, "Bury your feelings deep down, Luke. They do you credit. But they could be made to serve the Emperor."

Luke nodded in agreement.

And then Obi-Wan vanished into the darkness.

Obi-Wan's spirit was invisible but present when Luke arrived in the Endor system, where the Empire had constructed a new Death Star battle station. When Luke surrendered to Darth

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Vader on the Endor forest moon, he listened as Luke maintained his belief that a remnant of Anakin Skywalker remained within Vader and had not been entirely consumed by evil. Luke urged his father to let go of his hate.

Vader said, "It is too late for me, son." Then he signaled to two stormtroopers to escort Luke to a waiting shuttle that would carry them to the Death Star. As the stormtroopers moved up behind Luke, Vader added, "The Emperor will show you the true nature of the Force. He is your Master now."

Luke stared at Vader for a moment before he said, "Then my father is truly dead."

Obi-Wan's spirit wished he had convinced Luke of this fact earlier.

After Vader delivered Luke to the Emperor's throne room on the Death Star, and the black-cloaked Emperor orchestrated a lightsaber duel to test father against son, Obi-Wan became even more resolved that Luke had been unprepared for the confrontation. *He's afraid of what will happen to Leia if he fails to defeat Vader*, Obi-Wan thought. *He must kill Vader.*

But when Luke finally managed to disarm and subdue Vader, Obi-Wan's spirit practically cringed when the Emperor fixed his yellow eyes on Luke and said, "Good! Your hate has made you powerful. Now, fulfill your destiny and take your father's place at my side!"

Obi-Wan feared that he would lose Luke as he had Anakin. But then Luke deactivated his lightsaber, faced the Emperor, and said, "Never!" He flung his lightsaber aside. "I'll never turn to the dark side. You've failed, Your Highness. I am a Jedi, like my father before me."

The Emperor scowled. "So be it...*Jedi.*"

And then the Emperor raised his gnarled fingers and unleashed his wrath on Luke, launching bolts of blue lightning at him. Luke screamed and writhed in agony, and then the Emperor released another barrage.

Ryder Windham

Vader was lying near the throne room's elevator shaft, where he'd collapsed during his duel with Luke. While the Emperor continued his assault on Luke, Obi-Wan's spirit monitored Vader as the injured figure staggered to his feet and returned to the Emperor's side.

"Father, please," Luke groaned. "Help me."

Obi-Wan knew that Vader would never help, and he felt almost overwhelmed by a sense of dread. Luke would soon be dead, and Vader would remain the Emperor's puppet. In fact, Obi-Wan was so convinced of Vader's nature that he was stunned by what happened next.

Vader grabbed the Emperor and lifted him off his feet. The deadly blue lightning fell away from Luke and arced back from the Emperor's fingertips and crashed down upon the Sith Lords. Vader carried the Emperor across the throne room and hurled him down into the elevator shaft. A moment later, the Emperor exploded in a great release of dark energy.

Vader collapsed near the edge of the elevator shaft. Luke went to his side and eased his armored body to the floor. A thin, wheezing noise hissed from the ventilator on Vader's mask. His breathing apparatus was damaged.

Had Obi-Wan's spirit not witnessed Vader's action, he never would have believed it. Vader, the same monster that Obi-Wan had left to die on Mustafar, had sacrificed himself to save his son. And suddenly Obi-Wan realized where he had failed. For unlike Luke, Obi-Wan had not only believed that Anakin was completely consumed by the dark side, but had actually *refused* to believe that any goodness could have remained within Vader. And by refusing to allow that possibility, Obi-Wan had condemned not only his former friend but his own capacity for hope.

Fortunately, Luke's unwavering faith in his father's innate goodness had proved to be a stronger force than the power of the dark side.

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Obi-Wan recalled what Qui-Gon Jinn's spirit had told him so long ago, when he said that Obi-Wan was not ready, and that he failed to understand. For so many years, Obi-Wan had thought Qui-Gon meant that he wasn't ready to comprehend details about Anakin's conversion to the dark side. But now, he finally understood his Master's words.

I wasn't ready to forgive Anakin. And he won't be entirely free unless I do.

Unfortunately, just as Obi-Wan realized that Anakin Skywalker lived, he also knew that Anakin would not live much longer. As Luke hauled his dying father toward a shuttle, Obi-Wan's spirit shifted his own psyche to another realm. And he waited.

After Anakin died in his son's arms, Obi-Wan called out into the void, "Anakin."

A moment later, Obi-Wan heard a familiar voice return from the darkness. "Obi-Wan? Master, I'm so sorry. So very, very—"

"Anakin, listen carefully," Obi-Wan interrupted. "You are in the netherworld of the Force, but if you ever wish to revisit corporeal space, then I still have one thing left to teach you. A way to become one with the Force. If you choose this path to immortality, then you must listen now, before your consciousness fades."

Obi-Wan sensed confusion and remorse in Anakin's psyche, then Anakin answered, "But Master...why me?"

"Because you ended the horror, Anakin," Obi-Wan said. "Because you fulfilled the prophecy. Because you were...and are...the Chosen One."

But Obi-Wan knew in his heart that those were not the only reasons. He added, "Because I was wrong about you. And because I am your friend."

Anakin answered quietly, "Thank you, Master."

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Luke Skywalker managed to haul his father's body into an Imperial shuttle and escaped the Death Star before his Rebel Alliance allies destroyed the battle station. After landing on the forest moon, he gathered deadwood to build a funeral pyre to cremate Anakin's armored remains. As he watched the flames rise into the night sky, he wished he had somehow been able to help his father sooner.

When the pyre burned no more, Luke rejoined his friends. The Rebels were having a victory celebration with their new allies, the diminutive fur-covered Ewoks, at the Ewoks' treetop village. Shortly after Luke arrived, he looked away from his jubilant friends to see the spectral, luminescent forms of Obi-Wan and Yoda appear nearby, against the darkness of the forest canopy. A moment later, a third spirit appeared beside the others. It was Anakin Skywalker.

The Jedi had returned.

Epilogue

Obi-Wan Kenobi saw Luke Skywalker standing a short distance from the entry dome of the Lars family homestead on Tatooine. The twin suns were closing in on the horizon and cast long shadows across the desert. Luke was facing the sunset, his back to Obi-Wan. A warm, gentle wind was blowing in from the west.

But neither Obi-Wan nor Luke was really on Tatooine.

It was five years after the Battle of Endor. Luke Skywalker was in his modest apartment at the former Imperial Palace on Coruscant, where he had reluctantly taken up residence after the Rebel Alliance defeated the Empire and formed the New Republic. Lying on his bed, he was sound asleep, and dreaming of Tatooine.

Obi-Wan said, "Luke?"

Luke turned away from the suns. "Hello, Ben," he said with a welcoming smile. "Been a long time."

"It has indeed," Obi-Wan replied. "And I'm afraid that it will be longer still until next time. I've come to say good-bye, Luke."

The desert landscape and the sky itself seemed to shimmer and shudder, and Obi-Wan realized that Luke was now suddenly aware of the fact that he was dreaming. Luke's smile melted, and he looked at Obi-Wan cautiously.

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Sensing Luke's thoughts, Obi-Wan said, "No, I'm not a dream. But the distances separating us have become too great for me to appear to you in any other way." He gestured at the surrounding dreamscape and added, "Now, even this last path is being closed to me."

"No," Luke said. "You can't leave us, Ben. We need you."

"You don't need me, Luke," Obi-Wan said, lifting his eyebrows slightly as he smiled. "You are a Jedi." Then his smile faded. "At any rate, the decision is not mine to make. I have lingered too long already, and can no longer postpone my journey from this life to what lies beyond."

Luke looked away from Obi-Wan, who sensed the young man's thoughts had turned to Yoda. Despite all that Luke had learned about the Force, he remained deeply saddened by the deaths of his friends.

"It is the pattern of all life to move on," Obi-Wan said. "You, too, will face this journey one day. You are strong in the Force, Luke, and with perseverance and discipline you will grow stronger still." Obi-Wan's gaze hardened as he added, "But you must never relax your guard. The Emperor is gone, but the dark side is still powerful. Never forget that."

"I won't."

"You will yet face great dangers, Luke." Then Obi-Wan's expression softened, and his smile returned as he continued, "But you will also find new allies at times and places where you expect them least."

"New allies?" Luke said, genuinely curious. "Who are they?"

Knowing that it was best not to reveal everything to Luke, Obi-Wan chose to ignore the question. As he felt himself begin to slip away from Luke's dream, he said, "And now, farewell. I loved you as a son, and as a student, and as a friend. Until we meet again, may the Force be with you."

"Ben—!"

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Obi-Wan's form had vanished, but his psyche lingered long enough to sense Luke think to himself, *Then I am alone. I am the last of the Jedi.*

"Not the last of the old Jedi, Luke," Obi-Wan said, his voice trailing off across the dimension of dreams. "The first of the new."

And Obi-Wan finally moved on.

STAR WARS®

A NEW HOPE: THE LIFE OF
LUKE SKYWALKER

BY RYDER WINDHAM



In memory of Archie Goodwin

Prologue

"Do you ever wonder about our father, Leia?" Luke asked.

"No," Leia said without hesitation. "I never do."

Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia Organa were on board the New Hope, a Dreadnaught-class heavy cruiser that currently served as the flagship for Mon Mothma, the recently elected chief councilor of the fledgling New Republic. They were in a meeting room near the cruiser's command deck, standing before a wide viewport that overlooked a small red planet orbiting a bright sun.

"Oh," Luke said. "I don't know how to say this, but...well, it's been months since he died, and I think there are some things we should talk about. I know you're still upset about how he—"

"Tortured me?" Leia interrupted. "Stood by and did nothing while Grand Moff Tarkin destroyed the planet Alderaan? Cut off your hand? Killed more people than we'll ever know?" She gestured to the red planet outside the viewport and added, "Do you have any idea how many Chubbitts died on Aridus because of Vader?"

Luke knew a great deal about the unfortunate Chubbitts, but he remained silent.

As Leia gazed into space, she said, "It seems everywhere we go, we find more of Vader's victims, more evidence of his horrific service to the Empire." She shook her head. "Why would I even want to think about that monster?"

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"Because our father wasn't just Darth Vader," Luke said. "He was also Anakin Skywalker, a Jedi. I've tried to tell you what happened on the Death Star at Endor, how he saved me from the Emperor and—"

"Saved you?" Leia said. "Luke, as I recall, Vader delivered you to the Emperor." She sighed. "I know you believe that Anakin Skywalker returned in the end, and if that's how you prefer to remember him, as the Jedi hero who destroyed the Emperor, that's your decision. But you can't expect me to do the same, because my father, Bail Organa, the man who raised me, he died on Alderaan."

"I'm sorry, Leia," Luke said. "I just thought—"

"You thought wrong, Luke," Leia said. "I have more important things on my mind than this. In case you haven't noticed, the Empire didn't die with the Emperor. We don't know how many Star Destroyers are still in service. Moff Harlow Jarnek has blockaded Spirador. Hundreds of planets still need our help." She moved away from the viewport. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a meeting to attend. The Chubbitts are justifiably cautious of offworlders, but I'm determined to convince them that an alliance with the New Republic is their best defense against the Empire." She turned and walked for the meeting room's exit.

Alone in the room, Luke returned his gaze to Aridus. He'd visited the desert planet before. Except that it had a single sun, he'd found it very similar to his own homeworld, Tatooine.

So much had happened since the day he'd left Mos Eisley Spaceport with Ben Kenobi on the Millennium Falcon. Back then, his greatest desire had been to have adventures on other worlds. He'd never imagined that he would eventually encounter the father he'd been told was dead, discover that Princess Leia was his sister, or become a champion of the Rebel Alliance.

But despite his accomplishments and many good friends, Luke sensed there was something missing in his life, as if part of him were somehow incomplete. The Empire had destroyed nearly all the records of the Jedi Order, including any information about Anakin Skywalker, leaving Luke with many questions about his place in the universe.

Can I avoid my father's mistakes?

Are all the other Jedi Knights truly gone?

How can I be a good Jedi when I know so little about them?

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Despite Leia's apparent lack of interest, Luke believed it was important for him to find out more about the life of Anakin Skywalker.

How can I know myself if I never really knew my father?

He had no idea whether gaining such knowledge would make him feel wiser or more fulfilled. All he knew was that he still felt alone and out of place, just as he'd felt when he was a little boy, growing up on a desolate moisture farm in the desert wastes of Tatooine....

Chapter One

“Is someone seeing me, Aunt Beru?” Luke asked.

Beru Lars was standing in her kitchen, making biscuits. She glanced at the four-year-old boy, her husband’s stepbrother’s son, who sat on the hard white steps that led up to the dining alcove, and said, “Your aunt Dama will be seeing all of us. She should be here any time now.”

Luke frowned. “No. I don’t mean Aunt Dama. I mean, is someone *watching* me?”

Beru smiled. “You’re right here with me, so I’m watching you.”

The boy shook his head. “No. Not you or Uncle Owen. I mean someone else. Someone I can’t see.”

Beru almost dropped the spoon she had just picked up. She set the spoon down beside a bowl with a gray mixture in it and tried to keep her voice calm as she asked, “What makes you say that, Luke?”

Luke was holding a small toy landspeeder. As he turned the toy over in his hands, he said, “I just felt like someone else was close by. I thought maybe there was somebody behind me, but when I looked up the steps...” He turned his head to look back toward the dining alcove, then returned his gaze to his aunt. “No one’s there.”

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Beru sighed. "Living far from other folks like we do, it's not unusual to get a bit jumpy. You feel a small shift in the air, or hear a slight noise, and your imagination starts playing tricks on you."

"Really?" Luke said. "But I didn't hear the wind or anything this time."

Beru gripped the edge of the kitchen counter to steady herself. She said, "There's been *other* times you thought someone else was watching?"

"Sometimes when I play outside," Luke said. "And every time we go into Anchorhead."

Beru stepped away from the counter to kneel down beside Luke. Gripping his upper arms gently, she said, "Luke, this is important. You've never, ever actually seen any man watching you, have you?"

Luke cocked his head sideways as he held his aunt's gaze. "You think it's a man?"

Beru shook her head. "No, sorry, I didn't mean to say that. I meant *anyone*, any *person*. You've never noticed anyone?"

Luke shook his head. "No, ma'am."

Just then they heard the sound of a landspeeder engine drift down outside, and Uncle Owen bellowed, "Beru! Your sister's here!"

Beru's eyes flicked to the dining cove, then back to Luke. She said, "I think it's best that we don't mention any of this to your uncle. This feeling you get sometimes, it might worry him. You know how he is about strangers and trespassers. And we don't want to worry Uncle Owen, do we?"

"No, ma'am," Luke said. "So, it's only a feeling? There's no one really watching me?"

"That's right," Beru said. "Now, come on, let's go greet your aunt Dama."

Luke got up, clutching his toy landspeeder in his hand.

The Lars homestead on Tatooine consisted of various underground rooms that branched off a deep, steep-walled open

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pit that was the central courtyard. Beru took Luke's free hand and led him out across the courtyard, up a flight of steps along the pit's wall, and then up through an enclosed stairway. It was a long climb for a little boy, but Luke didn't complain. He said, "Aunt Dama has a new landspeeder."

"How do you know that?" Beru asked.

"Before Uncle Owen called you, I heard the engine coming. It sounds less rumby than the old one."

The enclosed stairway delivered them to the arched doorway of the homestead's pourstone entry dome. As Luke and Beru stepped out through the doorway and into the blazing heat of Tatooine's twin suns, a smiling, round-faced woman walked up to them and said, "There you are!"

"Hi, Aunt Dama," Luke said. He held out his toy. "I have a landspeeder too!"

Dama Whitesun Brunk was Beru's younger sister. Like Owen, Dama's husband, Sam, was a moisture farmer. They lived in Anchorhead, one of Tatooine's oldest settlements, where they owned and operated a small hotel. Although Anchorhead was only twenty kilometers away from the Lars homestead, Dama and Sam seldom visited.

"My, my, Luke," Dama said as she bent down to give Luke a hug. "You're growing faster than a ronto!" Releasing Luke, she stood up and embraced her sister. "I'm so happy to see you, Beru."

"You look well, Dama."

"Sorry we haven't visited you in so long. Between managing the farm and the hotel, seems like we're always busy."

Luke looked past Dama to see Sam Brunk and Uncle Owen standing beside a dark green landspeeder with a bubble canopy and three sleek thrusters on each side. Wanting a closer look at the vehicle, he began walking toward it. Owen and Sam were facing away from him, gazing at the tall moisture vaporator units that were neatly spaced away from each other across the

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surrounding salt flat, and talking about what most moisture farmers usually talked about.

“How’s your crop?”

“Can’t complain.”

“I had to replace two vaporators.”

“Broken?”

“Stolen.”

“Jawas?”

“Probably.”

Seeing that the two men were still so engaged in their conversation that they hadn’t noticed him, Luke moved up close beside the parked speeder and studied the emblem and Aurebesh lettering that were positioned below the canopy’s rim: *Mobquet A-1 Deluxe Floater*. He was proud that he’d learned how to read Basic from a set of old educational datatapes that Aunt Beru had given him, but wasn’t sure how to pronounce *Mobquet*.

Luke moved around to the front of the speeder and was admiring the design of the inlet ports that ringed its rounded nose when he noticed Beru and Dama walking over toward their husbands. Dama rolled her eyes and said, “I suppose you two are talking about Tatooine’s rich, cultural history again?”

Sam Brunk chuckled, then said, “No, but speaking of history...did you hear that the Empire outlawed Podracing?”

Beru and Owen shook their heads.

Sam continued, “Heard it on a HoloNet report. At first, I figured the Empire would affect Tatooine about as much as the Republic did, which was not at all. But there’s already talk that the Mos Espa Arena might be shuttin’ down. If that happens, there’ll be no more Podraces for...” Sam’s gaze had drifted to an area beyond the homestead’s open pit. “Say, something’s different over there.”

Beru said, “Where?”

“There,” Sam said, pointing. “Didn’t you have some supply tanks, or some kind of...?” Sam stopped talking, and then everyone was silent.

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Luke noticed the sudden quiet and turned his head to follow the adults' gaze to the southwest. Except for some moisture vaporators in the distance, there was nothing to see but scorched ground.

"Sorry, Owen," Sam said, finally breaking the awkward silence. "I just realized what was, uh, missing. It's the headstones."

Owen said nothing, but just kept his eyes to the southwest.

Sam said, "I, uh, hope it wasn't vandals...."

"No," Owen said. "I removed the headstones."

"Oh," Sam said.

Without any further explanation, Owen turned and headed for the entry dome. After he was gone, Beru said, "Please forgive Owen. He...he just didn't see a need for anyone to know where Shmi was buried."

"But he removed *all* the headstones," Sam said. "His parents and uncle were buried there too, yes?"

Beru nodded.

Luke said, "Who's Shmi?"

Beru jumped. She hadn't seen Luke in front of the parked speeder and didn't know that he'd been listening. She glanced at Dama, then back at Luke and said, "Shmi was your grandmother, Luke."

"Oh," he said. "Is my father buried there too?"

"No," Beru said. "Your father didn't die on Tatooine."

"Oh," he said again. Then he looked at Dama and Sam and said, "My father was a navigator on a spice freighter. Uncle Owen told me so."

Chapter Two

It had been a long time since Luke Skywalker had felt like someone was watching him. A few years, at least. But he felt it now.

He jumped to his feet and looked around. He'd been lying on a blanket that he'd stretched out on the sand so he could be comfortable while he gazed at the night sky. Now he was anything but relaxed.

He glanced back in the direction of his home. He half expected to see his uncle trudging toward him, but there was no sign of movement between his position and the winking lights on the distant security sensors that ringed the moisture farm's perimeter.

Like any seven-year-old child on Tatooine, Luke knew the dangers of straying too far from home at any time of day, let alone the middle of the night. Hidden sinkholes and sudden sandstorms were deadly threats, as were various nasty creatures always looking for a meal. Womp rats traveled in packs and had claws and teeth that could easily slice through flesh. Hulking krayt dragons roamed the mountains and canyons of the Jundland Wastes. Worst of all were the Sand People, the masked nomads also known as Tusken Raiders, who sometimes attacked and killed without any obvious motive or reason. More than

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once, Luke had heard his uncle say, “If the heat doesn’t kill you on Tatooine, everything else will.”

Luke recalled other times when he’d had the sensation of being watched by some invisible presence. His aunt Beru knew about at least one time, when he was four, because he’d told her. What he didn’t tell her, because he didn’t know how to explain it and didn’t want to hurt her feelings, was that he had taken some comfort in the idea of someone else watching over him. But then she’d told him his mind had just been playing tricks on him, or something like that, and he’d stopped thinking about it.

Luke scanned the dark horizon. Still no sign of movement. The only sound he heard was the pounding of his own heart. He tried to convince himself that he hadn’t really been frightened, and that he was merely nervous with excitement. He took a deep breath to calm down, and, as he did so, he knew he had overreacted. He was certain that no one was watching him. He knew he was alone.

All alone.

Still standing, he tilted his head back to look at the stars that filled the sky. He’d memorized the names of many worlds and stellar bodies in the Arkanis Sector, the region of space in the galaxy’s Outer Rim, which included Tatooine’s binary star system. There was Arkanis which boasted a starship pilot training facility. Both Andooweel and C-Foroon were said to be refuges for smugglers and pirates, as was the water planet Tarnoonga. He knew little about Najiba, Tythe, Hypori, or Siskeen but had heard that Geonosis had been the location of the first battle of the Clone Wars, the great interstellar conflict which had ended shortly after he was born. Luke suspected that all these worlds were far more interesting than Tatooine.

A bright flare streaked across the northern hemisphere before it vanished. Luke smiled as he held his breath and waited. A moment later, two more streaks radiated from the same direction. Luke had heard some folks call such streaks of light “shooting stars,” and his uncle often said, “People can believe

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what they like.” But Luke knew that the streaks were meteors, bits of debris striking and burning up in Tatooine’s atmosphere, and he maintained that anyone who called them shooting stars was just plain wrong.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a bright point of light that appeared to be moving slowly, drifting up from the northern horizon. He realized at once that it was a spacecraft, reflecting the light from Tatooine’s suns. From its trajectory, he guessed it had launched from Mos Eisley Spaceport, roughly fifty kilometers away. He wondered if it might be a spice freighter. For all he knew, he was looking at the same ship that had once carried his father.

Luke watched the moving point of light until it vanished into space. He wondered if the ship might leave the Arkanis Sector. He could only imagine where the ship was headed, but he wished he were on it anyway.

He stooped down to pick up the blanket and the small container of water he’d brought with him and began walking home. He paused twice to look at the stars again, and it took him almost twenty minutes to reach the security sensors.

He dipped his hand into a pocket and withdrew a droid caller he’d rigged to allow him to sneak past the small, roving guard droids that patrolled the homestead’s perimeter. Out of habit, he walked carefully around the area where he knew the bodies of his grandmother and Owen’s parents and uncle were buried.

Luke still knew precious little about his own family, because Owen barely spoke at all about them. At some point, Luke had learned that Owen’s uncle was named Edern, and that he’d died at the age of fourteen when he lost control of a landspeeder. As for any information about Luke’s mother, both Owen and Beru claimed that they knew nothing about her.

Carrying the rigged droid caller and thinking of the dead, Luke was only a few steps from the entry dome when his uncle appeared unexpectedly in the dome’s arched doorway. Owen was

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carrying a long laser rifle. Luke was alarmed to find himself staring straight down the weapon's barrel.

Owen jumped when he saw Luke, jerking the rifle back sharply to raise its barrel to the sky. Luke stood frozen in his tracks.

Owen scowled. "I was coming to look for you," he said. "Just two minutes ago, your aunt went to check in on you. Found your loft empty." He shook his head. "Boy, what were you doing out there? Trying to get yourself killed?"

"No, sir," Luke said. The blanket he carried suddenly felt very heavy.

"Well, what, then?"

"I'm sorry," Luke said. "I heard some kids at Anchorhead say there'd be a meteor shower, and I just wanted a clear view. I know you don't like to turn off the lights around here, but they make it hard to see the sky at night."

Owen's face went red. "You risked your neck to see a meteor shower?"

"I missed the last one," Luke said. "They don't happen that often. I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to make you angry. I just wanted to—"

"Inside," Owen said. "Now. And straight to bed." As Luke moved past him, Owen added, "Hang on. Hand over that droid caller."

Luke gave the device to him.

"We'll talk about this in the morning."

"Yes, sir."

As Luke lay on the mat in his sleeping loft, he couldn't help overhearing his uncle and aunt's heated discussion through the air vent that overlooked the central courtyard.

Owen said, "I'm telling you, I'm really at my wit's end with that boy."

"You know he didn't mean to upset us."

Ryder Windham

“That’s not the point, Beru. He can’t go wandering off as he pleases.”

“Did you always do everything your father told you to do?”

“This has nothing to do with my father.”

“I know. I just meant that boys don’t always listen to—”

“Oh, come now, you can’t be taking Luke’s side in this. Tell me, honestly, what if something had happened to him out there? And...and what if I’d gone looking for him, and I’d walked straight into a bunch of Tusken? Would *that* have convinced you...”

“Owen, please, keep your voice down.”

“...that maybe I have a good reason to worry about whether Luke does as I say? Honestly, Beru, I don’t enjoy bossing him around. But if he won’t listen to us, what’s going to happen to him?”

“Maybe he’d listen to someone else. Maybe Ob—”

“Hush! You keep that man’s name out of our home.”

Luke held his breath as he listened. He had no idea who his aunt and uncle were talking about, but he’d never heard his uncle snap at his aunt like that.

“Well, Owen,” Beru continued, “if, like you say, you’re at your wit’s end, what do you propose to do about it?”

“Well, I think it’s best to keep the boy occupied. Maybe he needs some more chores.”

Hearing this, Luke almost groaned out loud, but he stayed silent.

“More chores?” Beru laughed. “What more can he do? Owen, he’s only seven years old.”

“He needs to understand the importance of personal responsibility.”

“Luke already runs himself ragged for you.”

“Not ragged enough, apparently, if he has the energy to sneak off in the middle of the night. And on Tatooine! Isn’t that boy afraid of anything?”

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“Oh, listen to yourself,” Beru said. “Would it make you happier if he were afraid of you?”

“No, of course not,” Owen said. “It’s just that...when I stepped out to look for him tonight, I was carrying my laser rifle, and...Beru, I was startled. If I hadn’t set the rifle’s safety switch...”

“Oh, Owen!”

“...I might have shot him.”

“Well, thank goodness you set the safety.”

There was silence for a moment. Then Owen said, “Living here, surviving here, it helps if you have some degree of fear so you can be careful and stay alive. I’m not doing a very good job of raising Luke if I can’t convince him he should be afraid of Tusksens.”

“Maybe that shouldn’t surprise us,” Beru said. “His father wasn’t afraid of Tusksens either.”

Luke’s eyes widened at the mention of his father. He listened carefully, waiting for more details. Instead, there was another brief silence before Owen said, “Let’s not get into that. It’s been a long day. We both need to get some rest.”

Luke stared at the ceiling for a long time, thinking of the father he would never know, until he finally drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, Luke went to the dining alcove for breakfast. He wasn’t looking forward to facing his uncle, as he expected a long lecture about responsibility and all the dangers he’d already heard about before. He found his uncle seated at the dining table, finishing the last bits of food on the plate in front of him. Beru stepped up from the kitchen, carrying a plate of food for Luke, and she smiled as she saw him approach.

“Good morning,” Luke said as he took his seat.

Beru set down Luke’s plate in front of him. As she picked up Owen’s empty plate, Owen lifted his gaze to meet Luke’s eyes.

Ryder Windham

Luke felt his face flush. "I'm really sorry about last night, Uncle Owen. I...I never meant to make you angry, and I promise I'll—"

Owen raised a hand and shook his head slightly, signaling Luke to stop. "Let's hold off on promises," he said, "because they can be hard to keep."

Uh-oh, Luke thought. *Here comes the lecture.*

Beru said, "I'll let you two talk alone." She turned and descended to the kitchen.

Owen shifted his elbows on the table. "Luke, I've been accused of worrying too much about the people I care about, and I won't deny it. And I know from experience that a man can't take care of everything. Things happen. Sometimes people leave, and you think they'll be comin' back, but they don't. Do you understand?"

Luke wasn't sure, but he nodded.

"Well, I can't protect you all the time," Owen continued, "and I certainly can't teach you to be as cautious as I am. But after doing some thinking, I've come up with a solution that might at least make me worry less. I should warn you, though, I already told your aunt about this solution, and she doesn't like it one bit."

Luke braced himself. He was certain that his uncle was about to ground him or give him more chores. Or both.

Owen took a sip from a water cup, then said, "I was just about your age when my father taught me how to handle a laser rifle. I do believe I'd worry a bit less about you if you knew how to handle one too."

Luke's mouth fell open. "A laser rifle? Really?"

"You can have my uncle's old one. It's still good. After breakfast, we'll go over some safety basics, then do a little target practice."

"Wow!" Luke said. "Thanks, Uncle Owen!"

"You can thank me by living a good, long life," Owen replied. Then he leveled a finger at Luke and said, "And if you ever

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wander off on your own again, don't you even *think* of leaving without a weapon."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll go get the rifle," Owen said, rising from the table. "Now eat up before your food gets cold."

Owen left the alcove. Luke gobbled down his breakfast, then carried his plate and utensils to the kitchen, where he found his aunt canning vegetables. She looked up at him. "I don't have to tell you to be careful out there, do I?"

"No, ma'am." He was about to leave when he stopped, turned to Beru, and said, "When my father left, did he tell Uncle Owen that he was gonna come back?"

Beru frowned slightly, then said, "Oh, Luke. You know it's best not to wonder about such things."

"But did he?"

She shook her head. "No," she said. "He didn't. He didn't say anything. He...he just left."

Luke bit his lower lip, then said, "I'd never do that. Leave without saying good-bye, I mean."

Beru smiled. "I know you wouldn't." She stepped over and gave Luke a hug.

"Gosh, you're squeezin' me," Luke said, laughing. Beru released him and he said, "See you later." He ran up the steps, eager to catch up with his uncle.

Chapter Three

By the age of thirteen, Luke was a crack shot with his laser rifle, which certainly encouraged womp rats to keep their distance from the Lars homestead. He also knew just about everything there was to know about maintaining moisture vaporators, and he had a good deal of experience refurbishing Treadwell droids. His technical skills encouraged his uncle to allow him to work on the family landspeeder, a black SoroSuub V-35 Courier.

But because he had no genuine interest in pest control, moisture farming, or fixing Treadwells, and because it would be a cold day on Tatooine before Owen would let a thirteen-year-old boy drive a landspeeder, Luke found himself growing increasingly restless for any kind of diversion. As much as he loved his aunt and uncle, he didn't believe that he could ever understand them.

Living on a desert world in the Outer Rim was their choice, he thought. Not mine.

He wasn't completely isolated. He had a small computer that he usually kept in his sleeping loft, and he sometimes used it to communicate with other kids, including his best friend, Biggs Darklighter. Biggs lived on his father's moisture farm just eight kilometers away, which made them practically neighbors. He was

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five years older than Luke, but they shared common interests in high-speed repulsorlift vehicles and interstellar travel. Biggs also had no desire to become a moisture farmer, and he talked often of his plans to leave Tatooine and go to the Academy.

One evening, after dinner, Luke brought his computer into the tech dome, the underground family garage, so he could view instructions for assembling a scale model of a T-16 skyhopper. He had the model's pieces laid out on his workbench and was about to secure a stabilizer into place when his computer made a beeping sound. Luke knew that Biggs had gone with his family to Mos Espa, and hoped the incoming call was from him.

He pressed a button and watched the skyhopper instructions vanish from the computer's oval monitor, which then displayed a flickering image of a dark-haired boy. It was Windy Starkiller, who was also thirteen and lived on a nearby moisture farm with his parents.

"Hey, Windy," Luke said.

"Luke, I just got home from Anchorhead with my folks. Wanna know what Fixer and Tank called us?"

"Huh?"

"They called us small fry. Can you believe that?"

"Small fry?"

"Yeah, just because we're not old enough to drive landspeeders and they are. They were bragging about going racing in the canyon south of Ja-Mero Ridge tomorrow afternoon. They said it was 'more than small fry like you and Skywalker could ever handle.' What a couple of jerks."

Luke winced. "They called us jerks too?"

"Not us, you idiot," Windy said, rolling his eyes. "Them! They're the jerks!"

"Oh," Luke said. He didn't want Windy to know that he felt hurt by what the other boys had said. Fixer, whose real name was Laze Loneozner, was always trying to repair one thing or another, and Janek Sunber was called Tank because he was bigger than the other kids. They practically lived at Tosche

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Station, the power station outside Anchorhead, and Luke liked them both. Or *bad* liked them. He'd thought they were his friends.

"We oughtta do something," Windy said. "Something to prove we're not small fry! Something...I dunno...dangerous!"

Luke pursed his lips, then said, "How's Huey?"

"Fine," Windy said. "Why?"

"Bring him over tomorrow morning," Luke said. "We'll take him for a ride."

"Where?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow. Oh, and bring your rifle." Luke broke the connection and Windy's image flickered off the computer screen.

Huey was a young dewback, a four-legged, green-skinned lizard. He was not fully grown, but was large and strong enough to carry two people at once. Although he mostly resided on Windy's family's property, Luke had helped raise Huey from a pup, and the two boys considered him their shared pet.

Luke was waiting for Windy and Huey when they arrived early at the Lars homestead. He had already checked and rechecked the items on his utility belt and cleaned the sand goggles that dangled from a strap around his neck. He held his laser rifle away from his body, its barrel aimed at the bright blue sky, just as Owen had taught him.

Windy straddled the saddle on Huey's broad back, which also carried Windy's rifle and various provisions. When Huey saw Luke, he trotted faster across the salt flat until he came to a quick stop in front of Luke, then bumped his green snout affectionately against Luke's chest.

Windy said, "Where's your uncle?"

"Out on the south range," Luke said as he gave Huey a pat. "Did you bring your scanner to check the weather?"

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Windy patted the large leather pouch at the side of his utility belt and said, "Wouldn't leave home without it. Got my comlink too."

Luke secured his own rifle, then climbed up onto the saddle so he sat in front of Windy. Grabbing the reins, he glanced back at Windy and said, "All set?"

"You still haven't told me where we're going."

"Ja-Mero Ridge."

Windy gasped. "Are you crazy? That's in the Jundland Wastes!"

"You *said* we should do something dangerous. And just think...when Fixer and Tank go racing this afternoon, imagine the looks on their faces when they find us way out there, shooting womp rats. Bet they never traveled *that* far on their own before they got their landspeeders!"

"I dunno," Windy said. "It'll take us hours to get there."

"Huey can handle it," Luke said. "Besides, he needs the exercise. And we don't want anyone calling us small fry, right?"

"Yeah," Windy said, quickly warming to the idea. "You're right. Fixer and Tank will be speechless when they see us. Let's go!"

Luke gave the reins a tug as he pressed his ankles gently against Huey's sides. Huey turned and trotted away from the Lars homestead, carrying the boys toward the Jundland Wastes.

Luke smiled. It was a beautiful day. There wasn't a cloud in the sky.

"I thought you checked the weather before we left, Windy!" Luke shouted over the roaring wind as he guided Huey toward a cluster of towering buttes.

"Relax, Skywalker!" Windy shouted back. "It didn't say anything about a sandswirl!"

"Well, Huey's getting restless!"

Huey responded with a nervous grunt as he lowered his head and trotted faster.

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High winds tore at the two boys and their dewback mount. They'd been traveling for far more hours than they'd anticipated along the edge of the Jundland Wastes, keeping a careful watch for Tusken Raiders and other predators. They had pretended not to notice the sky that began to darken as evening fell, but could not ignore the winds that had blown in as if from nowhere. They knew that a storm was coming and that they couldn't stay out in the open. To make matters worse, Windy had just discovered that he'd accidentally overcharged his comlink's battery, leaving them without any way to summon help.

Luke had studied an old datatape at home when he'd plotted their journey to Ja-Mero Ridge, and he thought he'd found a shortcut. But as they approached one butte that was bracketed by two others, he suddenly realized he wasn't sure which way to go.

Luke said, "I say we take the right fork."

"Left!" Windy said. "It's to the left!"

Huey grunted again. Holding tight to the reins, Luke guided the dewback to the right, and the boys found themselves moving past two walls of rock. As the space between the walls narrowed, Luke noticed an unusual stillness in the air. He said in a low whisper, "I got a bad feeling about this."

They emerged from the passage onto a high ledge that hugged the edge of the butte. The ledge overlooked the twisted canyons of the Jundland Wastes, and Tatooine's two suns hung low on the horizon. Massive storm clouds loomed in the bloodred sky above the Wastes. The clouds appeared to be growing and expanding, moving toward the boys' position with the all the subtlety of an enormous malevolent beast.

The wind picked up suddenly. Luke knew they needed to find shelter fast. He dug his ankles into Huey's side, and the dewback bolted forward along the ledge, which descended into a steep incline. Windy clung to the grips on the side of the saddle as Huey galloped down the incline that wrapped around the butte.

The wind was howling and Huey was still running fast when they arrived at the base of the canyon. Huey was in midrun when

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he let out a whining snort, as if he'd gotten a whiff of something he didn't like, and then he stopped and reared without warning.

Luke and Windy were thrown from Huey's back. Windy screamed as they tumbled to the hard ground. Luke pushed himself up in time to see the frightened dewback race into a dark, narrow-walled ravine, taking the rifles and provisions with him.

Luke reached out to help Windy get up, but Windy shoved his hand aside and shouted, "All this is your fault! It was your idea to come out here!"

"Well, you fried the comlink!" Luke said. Furious, he pulled a strip of cloth from a pouch on his utility belt and wrapped it around the lower half of his face.

Ducking into a wall's shallow alcove, Windy tried to escape the stinging bits of fine sand that whipped through the canyon. Seeing Luke securing the cloth strip over his face, he said, "What do you think you're doing, Skywalker?"

"I'm going to find Huey," Luke said as he pulled his goggles up over his eyes. "His homing instinct is the only thing that can get us home."

"You'll never make it! You'll never find your way back!"

"Huey can't be too far," Luke said. He started to walk off.

Windy watched Luke for a moment, then said, "I'm not staying in here by myself!" He pulled on his own goggles as he moved after Luke.

They entered the ravine and began calling for Huey. The dewback responded immediately with two urgent grunts. They found him hugging the ground and trembling with fear a short distance away. The rifles and other gear were still strapped across his back.

"It's okay, little guy," Luke said as he placed his hands on Huey's head, trying to comfort him. "We'll get you to cover."

Luke looked at Windy and saw him standing rigid beside Huey. Windy was stammering Luke's name as he pointed down the length of the ravine. Luke followed Windy's gaze to see an immense shadowy form shift amid the swirling dust and sand.

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It was a krayt dragon.

Luke gasped. The monster's wide, massive body very nearly filled the ravine. It lumbered forward, brushing against the rocky walls as it raised its horned head to display a mouth filled with thick, sharp fangs.

Luke knew if he didn't do something fast, he'd be dead. He jumped behind Huey and practically pounced on his laser rifle. He yanked the rifle free, swung the stock up against the right side of his chest, aimed for the krayt's head, and fired two quick bursts.

The krayt stopped and jerked its head back as the fired energy bolts slammed into it, right between the eyes. Seeing that he'd slowed the krayt, Luke clutched his rifle with his right hand while he reached out with his left to pull Windy's rifle free. "Come on, Windy!" Luke said as he held the other rifle out to his friend.

But Windy didn't take the offered weapon. Instead, he said, "Run, Luke! Run!"

"No!" Luke said. "We can hold him off!"

Windy panicked. He turned fast, knocking his own rifle from Luke's hand before he started running back the way they'd come.

The krayt roared. Luke raised his rifle and squeezed off more energy bolts into the krayt's head. As the krayt roared again and advanced in his direction, Luke realized that he'd only managed to make the monster more enraged.

The krayt lunged at Luke. Huey made a sudden jerk that knocked Luke aside, throwing him back after Windy's fleeing form. Luke rolled across the hard ground. As he raised his gaze back to the krayt, he heard a terrible crunching sound and saw the krayt biting down on Huey.

No!

Huey's body went limp and dangled from the krayt's jaws. Luke backed away slowly, slinking after Windy and hoping the krayt wouldn't notice his movement. Before he rounded a turn in the ravine, he glanced back at Huey and whimpered, "I'm sorry."

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He tried to ignore the sound of the krayt tearing into the dewback.

As the ravine grew darker, Luke realized that the suns had finally set. He took a glowlamp from his belt and activated it so he could see better, but moved carefully so he wouldn't cast any shadows that might attract the krayt.

He heard Windy sobbing and felt a rush of anger. If he could hear Windy's sobs, he guessed the krayt might hear them too. He arrived outside the mouth of a shallow, low-ceilinged cave. He held the glowlamp before him as he entered the cave, and saw Windy slumped against the wall with his hands over his face.

"It's coming for us," Windy cried. "We're dead."

Luke heard a loud shuffling sound from outside the cave. He whispered, "Windy, be quiet."

Windy sobbed. "Mama...Mama..."

A moment later, there was a tremendous crash as the krayt's horned head slammed against the mouth of the cave. Because of Windy's sobbing, Luke had not heard the krayt's approach. Luke and Windy fell back to the deepest recess as the krayt drew back. Then the krayt launched itself again at the cave's entrance, ramming it so hard that it shattered rock.

Windy screamed, "We're dead!"

As the krayt prepared to throw its full weight against the crumbling wall, a strange, eerie howl drifted through the ravine and echoed off its walls.

Luke said, "What's that sound?"

Windy held his breath for a moment, then replied, "The wind?"

The howl continued for a moment longer, then died off. Luke peered cautiously out of the cave and saw the krayt lying on the ground. Its eyes were closed, and it was making a rumbling sound through its flared nostrils. Luke realized that it had fallen asleep.

Luke thought he saw a figure move in the darkness beyond the krayt's slumbering form. He held very still and watched the

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area for several seconds but decided he must have just seen some dust shifting in the ravine. The krayt remained motionless.

Turning back to Windy, Luke said, "It's asleep. We can get past it."

"And go where?" Windy said, outraged. "Without Huey? In the middle of a sandswirl? We're *never* going to find the way home." He shook his head and began to sob again. "They'll find our bones one day. Just old bones."

Luke was about to grab Windy and haul him out of the cave when he heard a man clearing his throat. Both boys turned their heads fast to see a hooded figure standing outside the cave. He was wearing a dark brown robe and holding a staff that was topped by a slender glowrod. The figure pulled back his hood to reveal the weathered face of a white-haired, bearded man.

"I'm Ben Kenobi," the man said. "We don't have much time if I'm going to get you boys home."

Interlude

Still on board the New Hope in orbit of Aridus, Luke recalled how Ben Kenobi had taken him and Windy back to the Lars homestead. Luke's uncle and aunt had been waiting with Windy's parents, who were extremely grateful to Ben for rescuing their son. Everyone was stunned when Owen abruptly told Ben to leave and not to come back.

The experience had left Luke baffled. Even now, some ten years after the incident, he still did not know why Owen had been so angry with Ben. From what little he knew, he assumed that Ben's purpose on Tatooine had been to discreetly watch over him while Owen and Beru raised him as if he were an ordinary child, not the son of a Jedi-turned-Sith Lord. But if both Ben and Owen had been responsible for protecting Luke, why hadn't they gotten along? Luke could only imagine why Owen had so aggressively objected to Ben's presence.

Luke remembered listening to conversations between his uncle and aunt, practically spying on them, hoping to hear any small detail about his father or Ben Kenobi. Owen and Beru never revealed much but merely reinforced that they preferred not to discuss either man.

Once, when Luke was about seventeen, Owen had become outraged when Beru had mentioned Anakin in front of Luke. After Owen had stormed off, Luke had asked his aunt what had happened between his father and Owen. His aunt had fumbled with words, said something about how Owen might have been disappointed when Luke's father had chosen to leave Tatooine,

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and without even saying good-bye. Luke couldn't recall exactly what Beru had said, but suspected she hadn't been entirely truthful, possibly to protect him from any knowledge of Darth Vader. He was left to wonder how well his uncle and aunt had known Anakin, and whether they had ever even liked him.

It suddenly occurred to Luke...If they did know my father, maybe they were afraid of him because he was fearless?

Often Uncle Owen had often reprimanded Luke for lacking fear. Luke had never felt especially courageous, just restless for adventure, ever ready to seize an opportunity to journey beyond the limited range of the Lars homestead. If he'd ever been afraid of anything, it was that he might wind up stuck on the sand planet forever.

Still, he could now understand why his uncle had been so frustrated with him, a boy who so often seemed to lack common sense as well as fear. He wondered what Owen would have thought if he'd known about the first time Luke had been truly terrified....

Chapter Four

“Don’t be scared,” Biggs Darklighter said. “Climb in.”

“Who’re you calling scared?” Luke said as he secured his laser rifle next to Biggs’s weapon on the back of his friend’s landspeeder, which was parked a short distance from the entry dome to Luke’s home. “Just because you’re five years older’n me doesn’t make you five years braver!”

It was Luke’s fifteenth year on Tatooine, and he desperately wished he had his own landspeeder. His uncle had let him drive the family speeder a few times, but never alone, and only back and forth to Anchorhead. Luke had suggested to his uncle that it might be a good idea to buy a second speeder as a backup vehicle, but Owen said they didn’t need more than one. Luke knew he’d have to come up with a much better reason for another speeder before he pestered his uncle again.

Meanwhile, and most fortunately, Biggs had his own landspeeder, and he enjoyed spur-of-the-moment jaunts just as much as Luke did. Biggs’s speeder was an open-cockpit jalopy, an old Selanikio Sportster with a rebuilt Aratech Arrow engine that had a top speed of 250 kilometers per hour. Even resting motionless in the air, it purred loudly, as if it wanted to get moving.

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Luke jumped into the front passenger seat. “Why’re we still sitting here? Is this your landspeeder or your grandmother’s?”

Biggs wiggled his fingers beside one ear, as if he were flicking an invisible irritation. “Did I just hear a joke?” he said. “Tell me, do you think my grandmother’s speeder can do this?” He popped the clutch and stomped on the accelerator. The landspeeder tore off.

“Whoo-eee!” Luke shouted.

“Nice day for a ride!” Biggs shouted over the roar of his speeder’s engine as he made a wide turn around Luke’s home and headed north. “Where do you wanna go?”

“As far as we can get!”

Biggs grinned. “Would you settle for seeing the *Spice Siren*?”

Luke frowned. “Well, that’s only about ninety klicks away.”

Biggs laughed. “Would you rather I turned around?”

“Not a chance! I did extra chores yesterday so I could have today off. Let’s get to the *Siren* already! Can’t this heap go any faster?”

“Heap?! That tears it, Skywalker!” Biggs hit the brakes and brought the landspeeder to a sudden stop.

“Gosh, Biggs,” Luke said as the speeder bobbed in the air over the desert’s baked surface, the Lars homestead still visible behind them. “I was only joking.”

“Joking?” Biggs shook his head. “Of all the nerve...” He jumped out of the speeder’s cockpit and ran around the front of the vehicle to Luke’s side. Staring hard at Luke, he said, “You just insulted my speeder for the last time.”

Luke had never seen Biggs so angry. “Biggs, I’m sorry I said—”

“Don’t waste your breath saying sorry to me,” Biggs said. “If anyone deserves an apology, it’s my speeder.”

“Your...speeder?” Luke gasped. He couldn’t believe how Biggs was overreacting. “Are you serious, or—”

“*Shh!*” Biggs interrupted. He leaned over the speeder’s hood, placing his left ear close to its hot metal surface.

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Concerned, Luke said, "Something wrong with the engine?"

Biggs raised his head from the hood, then shook his head. "She...she's crying, Luke. She said her heart's broken because some...some moisture farmer's nephew called her...a heap!" Biggs made a sad face that was too ridiculous to take seriously.

Luke burst into laughter. When he was done, he said, "You really had me going there, pal."

But Biggs wasn't finished. "She also said maybe you'd joke about her less...if I let you drive."

Luke started to laugh again, but then he saw the grin on Biggs's face. The laughter caught in Luke's throat. He gasped. "Really?"

Biggs gestured to the empty seat behind the speeder's controls. "Shove over, hotshot. My speeder's ready to go, and we ain't got all day."

Luke slid behind the controls and Biggs jumped into the passenger seat. As Luke gunned the engine, he decided for the millionth time that Biggs Darklighter really was the best friend anyone could ever have. He pressed the accelerator and they zoomed off.

The *Spice Siren* had once been a Republic freighter, but that was before it had crashed on Tatooine and been reduced to a large scrap heap. Although Jawa scavengers had picked the large wreck clean ages before, it had evolved into something of a minor tourist destination on Tatooine. Unfortunately, when Luke and Biggs arrived at the *Space Siren's* final resting place, they found that it had attracted the wrong kind of tourists.

"Womp rats!" Luke said. The large omnivorous rodents were crawling all over the derelict.

"At least a dozen of 'em," Biggs said. "Careful, don't drive too close to the—"

Before Biggs could complete his warning, a womp rat leaped from the wreck's broken tail section and landed on the back of his speeder. Luke heard the loud thud behind him and stomped

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on the accelerator, launching the speeder forward and sending the womp rat skittering back against the speeder's central thruster. The womp rat dug its razor-sharp claws into the speeder's hull.

Biggs moved fast, twisting in his seat to grab his rifle just as the womp rat turned and opened its fanged jaws. Biggs fired an energy bolt directly into the womp rat's head, and it toppled off the back of the speeder.

Breathless, Luke said, "You all right?"

"Yeah," Biggs said. "Circle back. We can't let those womp rats become someone else's problem!"

It took them almost fifteen minutes to kill the remaining womp rats. They shot skillfully and efficiently, never leaving the safety of their vehicle until their last target had fallen. When they were done, they climbed out of the speeder to survey the carnage.

"Good thing we got here when we did," Luke said. "If some family had come to the *Siren* with kids...I hate to think what might have happened."

Biggs nodded. Toeing one of the carcasses, he said, "I've never seen womp rats this big outside of Beggar's Canyon."

Luke nodded. Beggar's Canyon was a long, winding channel of dried riverbeds that snaked through an area northeast of Mos Espa, and it was home to a notoriously large number of womp rats. Despite the verminous population, the canyon had long been a popular hangout for youths, a place to test their souped-up landspeeders and skyhoppers.

Luke said, "Think there might be more rats on the loose?"

"You can bet on it. We'd better report this to the officials in Anchorhead. But first, let's torch these carcasses before they attract more scavengers."

"The officials might not believe us. Maybe we should bring one rat back for proof?"

"Good idea."

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They gathered the carcasses, dragging them away from the *Spice Siren*, and used some spare fuel to set all but one of the larger womp rats ablaze. After they loaded and strapped the remaining carcass onto the back of the speeder, Luke returned to the driver's seat and they took off.

As they traveled southeast along the edge of the Jundland Wastes, Biggs gestured to a break in the mountain range on the right and said, "Wanna take a little detour?"

"Into the Wastes?"

"Why not? We've got time."

Luke grinned and turned right.

The desert soon gave way to rockier terrain, but the speeder continued to travel as smoothly as it had over the even salt flats. Biggs patted the speeder's dashboard and said, "Handles great, doesn't she?"

"I'll say! So, when we get to Anchorhead, who should we tell—"

"Stop the speeder."

"Huh?"

"Just do it."

Biggs was looking off to the side. Luke wasn't sure whether his friend was joking around again, but he brought the speeder to a stop and cut the engine.

Biggs said, "Look thataway." He pointed toward the Wastes. "See? That row of little bumps between those two buttes?"

Luke followed Biggs's gaze and saw a long series of shadowy shapes. He watched them for a moment, then said, "They're moving."

"They're banthas," Biggs said. "At least twenty or so. Looks like they're moving in single file."

"It's so...orderly." Luke glanced at Biggs. "Think there's Sand People riding them?"

"Let's find out," Biggs said. He had a set of macrobinoculars clipped to his belt, and he removed them and held them up to his eyes.

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Luke said, "Well?"

"See for yourself," Biggs said, handing the macrobinoculars to Luke.

Luke peered through the lenses and zoomed in on a bantha. On its back were two humanoid figures. He could see only their silhouettes, but then he saw a glint of metal on one figure's head. "Yep," he said. "Sand People."

"I wonder what they're up to." Keeping his eyes on the distant banthas, Biggs gestured at the speeder's controls and said, "Start her up again, then head for the left of that butte. Get us up to around one fifty until we're about two clicks from the butte, then kill the engine. We'll coast in quiet the rest of the way, get in close, and have a look without them seeing us first."

Luke looked at Biggs. "But what if they *do* see us first?"

Biggs flashed a toothy grin. "First, we smile pretty at them. Then we hope the engine starts up again and we leave very, very fast."

Luke followed Biggs's instructions and brought the coasting speeder to a silent stop near the base of the stratified butte. Beyond the butte, there was a wide, shallow valley. Luke and Biggs grabbed their laser rifles and left the speeder, staying low as they moved behind some rocks. They peered over the rocks, and they waited.

The banthas came into view a few minutes later, moving out from behind the next butte to proceed down into the valley. Luke shifted the macrobinoculars to the left of the procession and said, "They're heading for...I'm not sure what it is. A cluster of poles and arches? Maybe a fire pit?"

Biggs took the macrobinoculars. "Or ruins of some kind. Maybe a camp."

Luke watched the lead bantha wrap around their mysterious destination. The other banthas followed until they had formed a ring around the site, and then they came to a stop. Luke said, "What're they doing?"

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“The visibility’s not great,” Biggs said, “but I think the Tusken are dismounting. The banthas are just standing there. They’re bunched so tight around whatever they’re looking at I can’t see what’s going on.”

“Let’s just wait a little while,” Luke said. “See what happens.”

Several minutes later, the Tusken Raiders remounted the banthas and moved off in single file, continuing on their course away from Luke and Biggs. Luke said, “I wanna see what’s down there.”

“Me, too,” Biggs said. “But let’s stay put until they’re farther away.”

They waited until the banthas had traveled so far that they could barely be seen by the naked eye. They returned to Biggs’s speeder. Biggs said, “I’ll drive. You keep your rifle ready and your eyes peeled for any sign of a trap.”

Biggs’s speeder descended into the valley. As they drew closer to the place the Tusken Raiders had left, Luke realized that the arches and poles he’d seen earlier were made out of desiccated bantha bones. Bits of sun-bleached leather skins clung to some of the bones.

“Looks like an old Tusken camp, all right,” Biggs said as he guided his speeder through a slow turn around the ruins.

Clutching his rifle, Luke rose in his seat to get a better look at the area. He kept his voice low as he said, “What do you think happened here?”

“You got me,” Biggs said, “but whatever happened, it wasn’t recent. Those bantha ribs are whiter than a...What in the name of—”

Luke’s eyes locked on the same thing that had just caught Biggs’s attention. In the sand surrounding the remains of one Tusken dwelling were a number of shattered humanoid skeletons.

Biggs slowed his speeder to a stop. “Look there,” he said. “Those skulls...they’re cut clean in half. The only thing I know of that can cut with that kind of precision is an industrial laser.”

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Luke hadn't noticed just how still the air was until a strangely cold breeze flowed over and past them, and he nearly jumped when he saw movement in the ruins. The breeze had blown a pair of leather strips that dangled from one of the arched ribs. Luke didn't wonder what the leather strips might have been used for. It didn't take much imagination to guess that the Tuskens had once used them to string someone up.

Luke felt his blood run cold, and an overwhelming sense of dread engulfed him. He tried to tear his gaze from the leather strips, and felt suddenly queasy when he realized he could not, as if he were compelled to keep staring at them. "Biggs," he whispered as he slid back down against his seat, "get us out of here."

"What's wrong?"

"Biggs," Luke said again, his voice almost a whimper as he forced himself to squeeze his eyes shut, "go...now...*please*."

"Sure, just take it easy." Biggs tapped the accelerator and they sped off, heading out of the Jundland Wastes.

Several minutes later, after they'd left the Wastes, Biggs stopped the speeder and looked at Luke. He said, "You okay?"

Luke nodded. "Sorry," he said. "I don't know what came over me. That place, it...it just made me feel so..."

"Scared?"

"Yeah," Luke said. Then he quickly added, "You're not gonna tell anyone, are ya?"

"Not if you don't tell anyone *I* was scared."

"Really? You, too?"

Biggs nodded. "I've seen some spooky stuff before, but *that* place...? That was like a nightmare."

Luke nodded, but he thought, *No. It was worse.*

"Well, it's behind us now. And speaking of behind us..." Biggs glanced over his shoulder at the womp rat carcass strapped to the back of the speeder, then said, "Let's get this varmint to Anchorhead."

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They drove off. Luke tried to focus on the land ahead of them but kept thinking of the ruins. He wondered if his uncle or aunt had ever heard about an abandoned Tusken camp in the Jundland Wastes, but he knew better than to ask. If his uncle learned that he had been out exploring the Wastes, he'd be grounded indefinitely.

After reporting their skirmish with the womp rats to the Anchorhead officials, Biggs returned Luke to the Lars homestead. It was almost evening when they arrived to find a rust-encrusted Jawa sandcrawler parked near the homestead's entry dome. Luke climbed out of Biggs's speeder. Then Biggs took off, heading back to his own family's farm.

Luke walked to the front of the sandcrawler and found his uncle engaged in conversation with a group of Jawas. Hearing Luke's approach, the Jawas turned their small, hooded heads to fix their glowing yellow eyes on the boy. The chief Jawa directed the others to get some equipment from inside the sandcrawler.

Luke stopped beside his uncle and said, "What's going on?"

"Just bought some more vaporators," Owen said. "I'm expanding the farm to the outlying ranges."

More vaporators? Luke's shoulders sagged as he thought of the additional work that would be required of him.

Owen said, "Something wrong?"

"No, sir." Luke turned and looked away from the sandcrawler. The dust that Biggs's speeder had kicked up while departing was still in the air.

Suddenly, an idea struck Luke.

He straightened his shoulders. Trying to sound casual, he said, "Uncle Owen, I think it's great that you're expanding the farm."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, I always thought it was a shame, all that land of yours just sitting out there, not being used or generating income."

"Well, we're agreed on that."

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“But I was wondering...how am I supposed to get to the outlying ranges? I mean, it’s too far to walk. I’ll need to get to the vaporators fast, even for routine maintenance.” Lowering his voice so the Jawas wouldn’t hear, he added, “And if we’re going to stop scavengers from taking your property, I’ll need to check the new vaporators more often too.”

Owen’s brow furrowed. “You’re still trying to convince me we need another landspeeder.”

Luke shrugged. “Well, unless you want to use the family speeder every time we need to check a—”

“I’ll think about it,” Owen said.

Yes! Luke believed that his uncle would soon realize that getting another speeder was not only practical, but necessary. He also knew from experience that it would be best not to push his luck any more on the subject, at least not for the day. Trying not to grin, he nodded, then turned and started walking to the entry dome.

The suns were close to the horizon. Looking beyond the homestead’s courtyard, Luke saw long shadows crawling across the desert.

And then his gaze landed on the area of the unmarked graves that included his grandmother’s final resting place.

He thought of the broken skeletons he’d seen at the abandoned Tusken camp. He suddenly found himself wondering which graveyard was more miserable. The one where the butchered remains of the dead had been left exposed for all to see? Or the one where the buried were already all but forgotten? Luke couldn’t decide. Both were terribly unfortunate fates.

But as Luke descended to his underground home, he knew one thing for certain. As bad as life could be on Tatooine, death was usually worse.

Chapter Five

Luke was moving fast over the desert in his landspeeder, heading back home from Anchorhead, when he sighted yet another womp rat running toward some rocks. He had one hand on the speeder's controls and the other wrapped around the grip of his laser rifle, its barrel extended away from the vehicle. He didn't bother to reduce speed as he took aim and squeezed the weapon's trigger.

"Yee-oww!" Luke hollered with excitement when he saw the fired energy bolt strike the vile womp rat, killing it instantly. He was amazed by his own shot, and he doubted that Biggs had ever made a one-handed bull's-eye while driving a speeder.

It was Luke's seventeenth year on Tatooine. Although he still dreamed of adventure elsewhere, he was enjoying life more than ever. Two years earlier, his uncle had finally agreed to let him buy the used open-cockpit X-34 landspeeder that he now drove. Luke was also the proud owner of a used Incom T-16 skyhopper, a tri-wing, ion engine-equipped airspeeder that he used for trans-orbital jumps and racing through Beggar's Canyon. Biggs Darklighter had a skyhopper, too, as did most of their friends. Both Biggs and Luke had armed their T-16s with laser cannons in their ongoing effort to keep down the womp rat population.

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Raiding storehouses and gnawing through moisture vaporator cables, womp rats had become an increasingly big problem on Tatooine—so big that the government of Anchorhead and the regional members of Affiliated Moisture Farmers had passed a bounty ordinance that paid out ten credits per rat. Luke and Biggs were pouring most of their earnings into upgrading their T-16s.

Luke parked the landspeeder so he could run and collect the womp rat he'd just killed. He tossed the carcass into the back of his speeder, then jumped into the vehicle and took off. As he drove home, it occurred to him that the bounty on the womp rat might pay for a set of macrobinoculars he'd been wanting.

Luke arrived at the Lars homestead, parked his landspeeder, and ran down to the courtyard. "Uncle Owen! Aunt Beru! I'm home!"

"Late!" Owen bellowed as he rose from the table in the dining alcove. "And without the rebuilt parts for our Treadwell, even though you took all day!"

Owen had sent Luke to get some refurbished parts for a Treadwell droid at Tosche Station in Anchorhead, where Luke's friend Fixer worked as a mechanic. Unfortunately, Fixer claimed that he had become overwhelmed by several other jobs. Luke had known that his uncle would not be pleased that he was returning from Anchorhead with only a dead womp rat to show for his time away from the farm.

Luke saw his aunt emerge from the kitchen, but returned his gaze to his uncle. "I tried giving Fixer a hand, Uncle Owen," he said feebly, "but with his backlog, he says it'll be a week before—"

"Without that droid," Owen said, "we can't install those new vaporators."

"I *know*, Uncle Owen," Luke said. "And I kinda wondered...Biggs Darklighter's leaving soon for the Academy, and tomorrow, the gang's planning a sort of farewell celebration. Until the droid's working, I can't *do* much, so—"

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“So it’ll be an excuse to idle away more time,” Owen grumbled. “Luke, a moisture farmer can’t—”

“Owen,” Beru interrupted, “Biggs is Luke’s best friend. He’ll be gone a year or more. You let a brother leave without saying good-bye. Haven’t you wished—”

“Enough, Beru!” Owen snapped. He scowled, then looked at Luke.

Luke held his breath, waiting for his uncle’s decision.

Owen let out a defeated sigh. “You can go, young man,” he said. “But don’t ask for anything else until we have a functioning Treadwell. And if any vaporators break down...”

“Oh, they won’t, sir,” Luke said. “I promise.”

Owen walked off across the courtyard, leaving Luke with Beru in the dining alcove. Luke shook his head as he followed his aunt into the kitchen. “Gee,” he said, “I never figured Uncle Owen would give in. What *happened* between him and my father?”

Beru turned her back to Luke while she began slicing vegetables at the counter. “Er...nothing really, Luke,” she said. “Perhaps...Owen just...depended too much on your father staying with him on the farm.”

“Like he does now with me?” Luke leaned against the counter and looked at the floor. “Whenever I mention going to the Academy like Biggs, he—”

“He *cares* for you, Luke,” Beru said, then added, “in his own gruff way.”

“I guess I know that,” Luke said. “And all his effort on the farm is to build something for us all. Makes me feel like a traitor to even think about leaving, Aunt Beru. Still...some crazy part of me keeps feeling like there should be more.” He shook his head. “Maybe I’m just afraid to grow up, to face responsibility like Uncle Owen. What *else* could it be?”

He looked at his aunt and found her returning his gaze with a sad smile. Neither one of them knew what to say.

Luke drifted toward the tech dome so he could do a maintenance check on his skyhopper. He wanted to make sure it

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was thoroughly tuned before the next day, when he aimed to fly his best against Biggs at Beggar's Canyon.

"Hey, Biggs!" Luke said into his skyhopper's comm. "Over here!" Luke had just zoomed in from the south when he spotted Biggs's magenta T-16 whipping through the sky over Beggar's Canyon.

"I see you wagging your wings, hotshot," Biggs answered. "Glad you could make it. But just 'cause this is the last get-together of the two Shooting Stars, don't expect any breaks when the run begins!"

Luke grinned. *We're two Shooting Stars that can't be stopped.* Biggs had come up with that line, as well as the name for their very exclusive club, after the local authorities announced that each of them had shot more womp rats than any other bounty collector. Because Biggs happened to know that it annoyed Luke when anyone over the age of seven didn't know the proper name for meteors, Biggs couldn't resist joking, "We may never be meteors, but we'll always be Shooting Stars."

Biggs maneuvered his skyhopper so he was flying parallel with Luke, so close that Luke could clearly see Biggs's mustached face. As they circled over the mouth of the canyon, several more skyhoppers came into view. Luke instantly recognized the vehicles piloted by Windy Starkiller, Tosche Station's Fixer, and also Deak, another kid from Anchorhead.

One skyhopper was notably absent. Luke's friend Tank had recently left Tatooine to attend the Imperial Military Academy of Carida. Luke didn't know all the details, but he'd heard that Tank had failed to get into the Naval Academy on Prefsbelt IV, so it seemed doubtful that he'd wind up piloting starships for the Empire. This had surprised Luke, because he thought Tank was a pretty good pilot, at least in a skyhopper.

As Fixer's T-16 swept past him, Luke noticed that his airfoils had been freshly trimmed. *As if that'll make any difference,* Luke thought.

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Ever since Biggs had set the speed record for Beggar's Canyon and simultaneously become the first pilot to successfully fly a skyhopper through the open hole at the top of the rock formation known as the Stone Needle, Fixer had become obsessed with modifying his own T-16 to beat Biggs's time. Luke wondered whether Fixer had been spending more hours working on his T-16 than refurbishing parts for a certain Treadwell droid.

Because the farewell party was for Biggs, the other pilots insisted that he choose their course. Biggs picked one of the more treacherous stretches, a twisting route through a ravine that terminated at a high wall, which loomed over the area's largest womp rat burrow. Luke knew that the course would test almost any pilot's nerve, but he wasn't surprised that none of the others backed out immediately. No one wanted to be called a coward.

The starting signal was given. All the skyhoppers power-dived into the yawning canyon mouth.

Through his triangular windshield, Luke saw his T-16's shadow ripple over the canyon's rocky floor as he hurtled forward. Biggs's magenta T-16 was just ahead of him. He increased speed as he dropped altitude, zooming so low that he could no longer see the shadow that traveled beneath him, then blasted past Biggs to grab the lead.

As the skyhoppers whipped around the first turn, Luke accidentally swung wide, leaving an opening for Biggs, who accelerated ahead of him. A warning light flashed beside a sensor scope on Luke's control console, indicating that his starboard airfoil was less than a meter from the canyon wall. Luke laughed as he swerved away from the wall and went after Biggs.

A wide boulder lay across the canyon floor. Biggs brought his T-16 up fast to avoid a collision, but as he ascended over the boulder, Luke accelerated again, sheering through the gap between the top of the boulder and the bottom of his friend's skyhopper. Luke let out a loud whoop as he reclaimed the lead.

There came another sharp turn, and then the distance between the walls narrowed before the next twist. Luke glanced

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at his scopes to see whether Biggs was gaining on him, and found that three skyhoppers had already pulled up and out of the race by ascending vertically from the canyon. Less than one kilometer of snaking turns later, he was still ahead of Biggs, and the last of the other pilots had pulled out.

The distance between the walls opened slightly. Biggs said, "Gangway, hotshot, I'm making my move!" He sped past Luke and swung in front of him.

"Just like I figured, Biggs, ol' buddy...just a hair too early!" Luke chuckled. "There's still time for me to jump you before the last turn, and no room for you to overtake me after that!"

But as they approached the last turn, Biggs suddenly braked with his retros, leaving Luke with no choice but to pull up or collide. As Luke sent his T-16 straight up and out of the canyon, he shouted, "Biggs, you tricky son of a gun!"

Luke swung back at an angle so he could look down and see Biggs make the final turn. Biggs's T-16's cannons fired, launching ground-charge missiles at the womp rat burrows, and then he elevated rapidly to escape the ravine's dead-end wall.

"Way to go, Biggs!" Luke said into his comm as his friend rocketed out of the canyon. "I wouldn't have dared to try what you did! Guess that's why you're headed for the Academy, and I'll probably stay on the moisture farm."

"Don't kid yourself," Biggs laughed. "You'll be at the Academy soon enough."

The other pilots had landed their skyhoppers on a plateau along the canyon's upper rim. Luke and Biggs parked beside them, and Luke was still congratulating Biggs on his finish as they walked over to Fixer, Windy, and Deak, who were gathered beside Fixer's skyhopper.

Luke noticed they were with Camie, a pretty girl with dark hair, who had been hanging out at Tosche Station more and more lately. Camie was standing near Deak, her hand on his back. Luke had been nursing a crush on Camie for some time. Seeing her beside Deak, Luke couldn't help feeling jealous.

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“Look sharp, Camie,” Deak said as Luke and Biggs approached. “Here they come. ‘Two Shooting Stars that can’t be stopped.’” He said this in a whiny voice, making fun of the pair.

“That’s what we always say, Deak,” Biggs said affably. “And I didn’t see anyone else proving us wrong today.”

“Now that you mention it, Biggs,” Luke said, “I don’t recall seeing Deak anywhere near the finish.”

Fixer said, “That’s because Deak was the first one to leave the race.”

Camie looked at Deak and said, “Is that true?”

Deak said, “Well, I, uh, wanted to come back and see you, doll.”

“Oh, yeah?” Camie said. She stepped away from Deak. She didn’t even glance at Luke as she breezed past him and sidled up to Fixer. Looking back at Deak, Camie said, “From now on, *doll*, you can see me from a distance.”

Fixer grinned.

Luke thought, *Does Camie like Fixer?*

Windy said, “So, Biggs, after you graduate from the Academy, are you gonna go straight into the Imperial Navy?”

Biggs shrugged. “I’m not crazy about taking orders from anyone, but if joining the Navy is the surest way to become a licensed starpilot, then I’ll just suffer through it.”

Fixer said, “There might be another option, Biggs. From what I’ve heard, you don’t need a license to join the Rebellion. They’ll take anyone. Ha!”

Deak, Windy, and Camie laughed at this too. Luke just smiled sheepishly. In recent months, he had heard various rumors about the fledgling Rebel Alliance, which reportedly opposed the Galactic Empire and accused the Emperor of numerous atrocities. He looked at Biggs, wondering how his friend would respond to Fixer’s remark.

“Can’t say I know much about the Rebellion,” Biggs said, “but I think anyone who challenges the Empire is either very brave or very stupid.”

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“Oh, *definitely* very stupid,” Windy said. “Anyone who takes a potshot at the Emperor is just looking to die.”

“Could be,” Biggs said. “Anyway, it’s not like anyone on Tatooine has reason to worry. The Empire’s a long, long way from here, and so is any rebellion against it. But why are we talking about this? Is this a farewell celebration, or is this a—”

Before Biggs could finish, the group heard the roar of a repulsorlift engine. They all turned fast to see a landspeeder approaching over the plateau. Spewing smoke and flames, the speeder careened toward the landed skyhoppers, then swerved and smashed into an outcropping of gray rock.

With several other youths at their heels, Luke and Biggs ran to the crashed speeder. Luke was first to arrive at the side of the speeder’s driver, who’d been thrown from the vehicle and lay sprawled on the hard ground. Noticing the driver’s uniform, Luke said, “Biggs, he’s a Militia Scout!”

Although Tatooine was a largely lawless world, regional militia units patrolled the outskirts of the more civilized areas to watch for Tusken Raiders and other threats. Biggs knelt beside the man and said, “Easy, mister. You’re okay now.”

“No!” the man said. “Got to warn everyone...big trouble!”

The man’s eyelids fluttered, and then his hand lashed out to grip Biggs’s arm. Luke could tell that the man was in shock and trying not to pass out.

“Tusken Raiders on the rampage!” the wounded man continued. “Lot of ’em...mad as rock hornets! A supply caravan accidentally polluted one of their sacred wells!”

Biggs grimaced. “What kind of fools would do that?”

“Fools smuggling blasters...” the man continued. “Sand People got the smugglers *and* the guns! They’re well-armed and angry enough to hit Anchorhead and any farms in between! They weren’t far behind me, so—”

The man was interrupted by the sound of long-range blasterfire. A millisecond later, one of the landed skyhoppers erupted into a fireball. Luke was stunned as he looked at the

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burning skyhopper. He was relieved that the skyhopper had been empty, and also that it wasn't his.

"Everyone to cover!" Biggs shouted as more shots were fired. "They're here!"

As one group of youths dragged the wounded man beside the outcropping, another ran to their vehicles to grab their own blaster rifles. Fixer tossed rifles to Luke and Biggs, who threw themselves down behind some rocks to return fire, sending energized bolts back across the desert. Luke couldn't see the enemy, but as more blasterfire hammered against the rocks that protected him and his friends, he had no doubt that they were up against at least a dozen Sand People.

Luke glanced to his right and saw Windy hunkered over a portable comm unit that he'd hauled to the rocks. Luke said, "Windy, any luck with the communicator?"

"Too much atmospheric interference," Windy said. "Gotta wait till the suns are lower."

Hearing this, Biggs faced Luke and said, "By that time, the main party could be in Anchorhead! The gang's handling this fine, Luke. You game to try for one of the hoppers?"

"When my uncle's place is one of those in danger?" Luke said. "Try an' stop me!"

Taking the rifles with them, Luke and Biggs ran as fast as they could for Luke's skyhopper. As they ran, blaster shots slammed into the ground near their feet. They were more than halfway to the skyhopper, moving past another rocky outcropping, when Luke saw a masked humanoid form rise suddenly away from the rocks.

"Biggs!" Luke shouted.

And then Biggs saw it too. A Tusken Raider, standing on the rocks less than three meters away from them, close enough that they could smell his filthy robes. He was clutching a gaderffii, a long metal weapon with a sharp-tipped spear on one end and a blunt club on the other. He was poised to attack.

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Although Luke and Biggs were carrying rifles, they both knew that Tusken were notoriously fast. There was a definite possibility that the Tusken might deal a deadly blow with his gaderffi before either of them could fire a shot.

Biggs muttered, "Blast them and their ability to pop up out of nowhere." He placed one foot forward, bracing himself to jump back, as he said, "Move away from me, Luke, so instead of swinging that gaderffi, he'll be forced to throw—"

Biggs was still talking as the Tusken flung the gaderffi. Biggs tried to dodge it. He failed.

"No!" Luke shouted as the gaderffi struck Biggs. Biggs stumbled back, and the heavy spear fell away from his body.

Luke's reflexes took over, bringing his rifle up fast at the same time that the Tusken lunged at him. Luke squeezed the trigger. The blast caught the Tusken in the chest, and the masked figure collapsed in a heap against the rocks.

"Good shootin', hotshot," Biggs said as Luke helped him to his feet. "He only got my shoulder." Suddenly, Biggs trembled. "But from the way I f-feel, that point may have been dipped in sand bat venom."

"Hang on, Biggs," Luke said, helping him walk to the skyhopper.

As Luke eased Biggs into the cockpit and squeezed onto the seat beside him, he looked at the wound on his friend's shoulder. "I'll have you to a medi-droid before that stuff can do any damage," he said. He fired the T-16's engine. "I'm boosting us straight up and out of here!"

"No, Luke," Biggs said through clenched teeth as the T-16 lifted off. "Stay low. They're better armed than usual, remember? Try for altitude and we're a sitting duck for their long-range blasters!"

Just then a blaster bolt tore through the air in front of the T-16. Luke realized that Biggs was right. He pushed at the controls, doing his best to take evasive action.

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Biggs said, "You're going to have to stay down...go through the mountains...'stead'a over them."

"Through?" Luke said. "Biggs, there's no way except..."

"Yeah," Biggs said. "Diablo Cut! No one's ever done it before. Probably for the good reason that it's impossible! But if we take time to go the long way round, some farms and part of Anchorhead may not be waiting!"

Although Biggs hadn't mentioned it, Luke could think of another reason to avoid a longer route. The way Biggs was sweating, Luke had no doubt that the gaderffi's tip had indeed been poisoned, and that the poison was already working through Biggs's system. Unless they took a shortcut, Biggs might not survive.

Luke sent the T-16 into a steep plunge, into a narrow ravine. "Okay, Mr. Darklighter," Luke said. "Diablo Cut it is! Somebody's gotta be first. Why not us?"

The T-16 hurtled through the twisting ravine. Luke banked hard to wrap around one curve, only to find himself confronting another sharp turn, and then another after that. Hoping to avoid being sighted by any trigger-happy Sand People, he tried to stay below the shafts of sunlight that clung to the upper edges of the ravine's high walls.

Luke descended closer to the shadowy canyon floor. As he banked around a rock formation, his weight shifted to his right, accidentally pressing against Biggs's injured arm. Biggs groaned. Luke kept his eyes forward and sent the T-16 around the next turn.

"Luke..." Biggs gasped. "I must've been crazy...to get you into this. It can't be...done....It..."

Biggs fainted.

Luke saw what looked like a dark spot at the base of a cliff. He and Biggs had visited the area before, and he recognized the "spot" as the reason no skyhopper pilot had ever dared fly through Diablo Cut before. It was the entrance to a cavern system that cut under and through Beggar's Canyon. The ground

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outside the cavern was littered with the remnants of old Podracers.

Luke angled the T-16 into a steep dive, pulled up fast, and then leveled off to fly straight into the cave. He was immediately engulfed in total darkness.

Warning lights flashed on the T-16's console. Luke tore his gaze from his triangular windshield and locked his eyes on the sensor scopes. The scopes detected a deadly curtain of stalactites in his path. Luke sent the skyhopper between two stalactites, then veered around a third.

The warning lights continued to flash. Luke kept his gaze fixed on the scopes as he quickly adjusted the thrusters and lifted his port airfoil to avoid a collision with another underground rock formation. A moment later, he was weaving desperately between natural columns of stone.

The scopes displayed what resembled a smooth-walled straightaway. Luke guessed it was an ancient lava tube and accelerated into it, racing even faster through the darkness. Luke thought, *This really is crazy.*

The tube emptied into a wide chamber, and then Luke's scopes picked up what looked like an exit, an opening in the ceiling at the chamber's far end. Luke risked a glance through the windshield to see a jagged crack of pale blue light. Even though Biggs was unconscious, Luke said, "Open sky above us, Biggs! We're through!"

But as he steered the T-16 up through the opening, he received an unexpected greeting. A Tusken Raider scouting party was waiting outside the cavern, and, hearing his skyhopper's approach, they raised their pilfered blaster rifles and fired.

Luke angled up and away from the Tusken, but a moment later he heard a hammering sound from behind as blasterfire struck one of the T-16's afterburners. He knew that the skyhopper was bound to catch fire from the assault, but he held tight to the controls as he launched forward at top speed, heading southwest.

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He rocketed over the Mospic High Range and Bestine and was angling toward Anchorhead when a warning light flashed. His starboard airfoil was on fire. As smoke trailed from behind the T-16, he feared the craft might explode. He knew that his best chance to prevent an explosion was to plow the skyhopper into the sand, and not near a heavily populated area.

He suddenly realized he was no longer angling for Anchorhead. As if by instinct, he was heading home.

He saw the Lars homestead ahead and dropped the skyhopper at the perimeter. He winced as the starboard airfoil sheared off, and then the T-16 skidded across the sand before it came to a shuddering stop.

Luke threw the hatch open and pulled Biggs out. He was carrying Biggs to the homestead's entry dome when he saw his uncle running toward him.

"Luke!" Owen shouted. "Have you gone mad, young man?"

"Get a medpac for Biggs, Uncle Owen," Luke said. "An' have Aunt Beru call out the local militia *fast!*"

There were various causes for celebration on Tatooine that day, at least for the human population, excluding the smugglers who were killed by Tusken Raiders. Although there had still been some atmospheric interference, Aunt Beru was able to get a comm message to Anchorhead. The local militia—with the help of some rambunctious kids and their skyhoppers—drove off the Tusken from Beggar's Canyon and the surrounding areas and also recovered most of the stolen blasters. Although a landspeeder and a skyhopper had been destroyed at Beggar's Canyon, the wounded militia officer and the reckless young pilots all lived to fight and fly again.

Thanks to his friend Luke Skywalker and a fast-acting antitoxin, Biggs Darklighter made a swift and full recovery. As for Luke's skyhopper, that would require more effort to be restored.

Ryder Windham

But then Biggs left for the Academy. And Luke felt more stuck on the sand planet than ever before.

Chapter Six

Windy poked around the cramped cockpit of Luke's refurbished T-16 skyhopper and said, "Where're your macrobinoculars?"

"I forget," Luke lied as he guided the skyhopper toward Beggar's Canyon. He knew exactly where he'd hidden the macrobinoculars so Windy wouldn't get his grubby hands on them.

Luke glanced at a sensor scope and saw that two other skyhoppers had already arrived at his destination. *Only two*, he thought. He knew that the vehicles belonged to Fixer and Deak.

A year had passed since Biggs and Tank had left Tatooine. Luke missed Biggs especially and still wasn't used to the absence of his best friend's skyhopper at the infrequent get-togethers with other young people. He wondered where Biggs was now.

Normally, Windy would have flown his own skyhopper to Beggar's Canyon. According to Windy, his skyhopper had been "acting up," which was why he had accompanied his parents on their visit to the Lars homestead—so he could hitch a ride with Luke to meet up with the rest of the gang.

Windy saw the two skyhoppers on Luke's sensor scope. He said, "Looks like Fixer and Deak beat us."

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Luke laughed. "It's not like we were racing to *get* here, Windy."

Ignoring Luke's comment, Windy said, "It's an easy bet we'll see Camie too. She and Fixer are practically glued to each other."

"Huh," Luke said, as if he couldn't care less. He did his best not to think about Camie, who'd encouraged the others to call him Wormie, and for no good reason that he could think of.

Luke landed his skyhopper near the other two. As he and Windy climbed out, Windy said, "Thanks for the lift. I owe you."

"Don't mention it," Luke said as he closed the skyhopper's hatch.

They found Fixer, Camie, and Deak a short distance from the parked skyhoppers, in the shade of a rocky wall, where they had set up some folding chairs and a portable cooler. Fixer was just popping the lid on a beverage container when Windy and Luke arrived. "Hey, everybody," Luke said. "Where's the party?"

"Wherever *I* am, Luke," Fixer said. Turning to his girlfriend, he added, "Right, Camie?"

Camie pursed her lips and blew a kiss at Fixer. Luke thought, *Oh, brother.*

Windy said, "Hey, boys, guess what Skywalker was doing?"

"Hey!" Luke said. "*Shh!*" He wished Windy would keep his mouth shut, but like most of his wishes, this one didn't come true.

"Sitting in the tech dome," Windy continued, "playing an Academy recruitment tape!"

Everyone jeered. "I was not," Luke lied. In fact, he had been listening to the tape that came with the Applicant's Information Packet from the Imperial Space Academy when Windy had arrived at the Lars homestead. When he had heard Windy entering the tech dome, he hadn't been able to switch off the tape and hide it fast enough. It wasn't that Luke was ashamed of wanting to go to the Academy, but that he resented how everyone teased him about his desire to become a starpilot. He

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gave Windy a dirty look and thought, *You can find your own way home.*

“You never change, Skywalker,” Fixer said. “That all you want out of life, to parade around in a fancy uniform?”

Luke snapped, “So what do you want that’s so much better, Fixer?”

“Hey, you watch it, boy!” Fixer said. “Just because you got lucky on a couple of crummy tests, that doesn’t make you some kind of junior space explorer.”

Shaking his head, Luke said, “I never said I was any better than y—”

Fixer interrupted, “You know what *I* did back when they made me take those exams? I walked in, filled out my name, and walked out again. *I* showed ’em.”

Everyone but Luke seemed to find Fixer’s claim impressive as well as amusing. Windy waved dismissively at Luke and said, “Just because he can answer fancy trick questions and do schoolbook flight maneuvers, he thinks it makes him better than us.”

“I do not,” Luke protested.

Facing Luke, Fixer said, “So you happened to qualify? So what? What do ya think you are, Biggs or something?”

“Yeah,” Camie said, laughing. “He just wants to go to the Academy because Biggs did. He always was his hero.” The way she said *hero* made it sound like something foul.

Luke felt his face flush as he tried to ignore Camie. He kept his gaze on Fixer and said, “Yeah, I’d like to go to the Academy. Why shouldn’t I?”

“Because it’s for suckers, Skywalker!” Fixer said. “They want to stick you into a uniform and give you orders. At least at the power station, I’m my own boss.”

Windy said, “Anyway, my father says the Empire’s just recruiting more people into the academies so they can draft them into the starfleet.”

Ryder Windham

Deak looked down his nose at Luke and said, “Do you think *anybody* out there cares about *Luke Skywalker*?”

“If you leave home,” Camie added, “nobody knows you.”

Fixer drained his beverage container. “Hey, where is the juice?”

As Camie handed Fixer another drink, Luke said, “So, what’s on the program for today, Fixer?”

“Speed runs, Skywalker,” Fixer said. “Speed runs.”

“Oh?”

“Gonna see how much time I can shave off the back stretch.”

Windy said, “There’s no way you can cut much more time off your lap, Fix. You’re almost matching Biggs’s best time around Beggar’s Canyon as it is.”

“Yeah, well, Biggs isn’t here, and I am!” Fixer bellowed. “I’m as good as he ever was!”

“Oh, yeah?” Luke said. “Well, then why don’t you thread the Stone Needle like Biggs did? That ought to take five seconds or better off your time.”

Camie gasped. Although Luke had sounded pleasant, as if he were casually offering advice to a friend, Camie knew that he had just proposed a very dangerous challenge to Fixer. Deak and Windy knew it too and looked at Fixer to see his reaction.

Fixer squinted at Luke and said, “Yeah? And Biggs is the only one who ever flew through it at racing speed, is that what you’re saying?”

Luke chuckled. “No, I was just saying that if you want to improve your time, you—”

“You’re crazy, Luke!” Camie said, glaring at him. “Why don’t you guys go buzz the womp rats and take a few potshots at them? This speed run stuff is gonna get somebody killed.”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Fixer said. “What’s the matter, Camie? You don’t think I can do it? Listen, anything the great Biggs Darklighter could do, *I* can do.”

“I never said you couldn’t,” Camie said, trying to placate her boyfriend.

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"Yeah," Windy said, "nobody was knocking you, Fixer."

"Besides," Fixer said, "I don't need any shortcuts."

I knew he'd make some excuse, Luke thought. He smirked as he looked away from Fixer. Unfortunately, Fixer noticed.

"Hey!" Fixer said. "Do you wanna try and keep up with me?"

"Oh, Fixer," Camie said, shaking her head with disgust.

Still gazing at Luke, Fixer said, "Huh?"

Luke looked back at Fixer. "What?" Luke said. "*Me?*"

Fixer leered at him. "What, are you scared, Wormie?"

Luke exhaled. He knew that Fixer was just an overgrown jerk and that it was stupid to let the guy get under his skin. But with everyone looking at him, expecting him to back down, Luke wasn't in the mood to think reasonably. He said, "Yeah. All right. You're on!"

"Hoo, boy!" Deak laughed. "Wormie against the Fixer! That's gonna be a slaughter!"

Luke scowled. "Well, then *you* can ride with Fixer, Deak!" He turned for the door. "What're we waiting for, boys? Let's go!"

"Fixer!" Camie shouted as the four young men walked off. "Come back here, Fixer!" she hollered from beside the folding chairs. "I want this to stop right now!"

No one paid any attention to her.

Windy was scrunched inside the cockpit of Luke's T-16, poking around as he tried to find the macrobinoculars Luke had concealed. As Luke squeezed in behind the skyhopper's controls, Fixer's voice crackled over his comm. "Good luck, Skywalker," Fixer said. "See you in the tight spots!"

"Hey," Windy said, "I couldn't find those macrobinoculars anywhere."

"Never mind, Windy," Luke said. "Buckle up."

Luke revved the T-16's engines. He had adjusted the thrust sequence for extra boost, and the noise was phenomenal. Hearing the racket, Windy said, "Hey, what're you doing!"

"I'm standing in for Biggs!" Luke said. "Brace yourself."

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Luke's skyhopper shuddered as it lifted slowly off the ground. Over the comm, Fixer said, "Here we go. One run down the back stretch, Skywalker, whenever you're ready."

Windy was reaching for the T-16's sissy bar only to discover that Luke had removed it. "Hey, wait a minute!" he said. "You and Fixer in the bottleneck together? Count me out!"

Luke gestured to the hatch and said, "Well, jump!" But because they were already hovering several meters above the ground, he wasn't surprised that Windy remained seated.

Fixer said, "Fall in even with me, Skywalker, and we'll let 'er rip."

Luke maneuvered his skyhopper so it hovered in the air beside Fixer's. As soon as Luke was in position, Fixer said, "Okay, hit it!"

Two clouds of dust exploded from behind the two skyhoppers as they tore off into the canyon. As Luke accelerated and swung unnervingly close to the canyon's wall, Windy groaned loudly, then shrieked, "Look out!"

"Will you shut up and keep still!" Luke snapped.

Suddenly, Fixer's skyhopper zoomed forward and slid in front of Luke.

"Aw, no!" Luke said as he tapped his brakes to avoid flying straight into Fixer's thrusters. "You distracted me, Windy! Now Fixer's got the lead!"

"Well, let him keep it!" Windy shouted. "I want to live!"

From the comm, Fixer laughed and said, "How does my afterblast feel, Luke?"

The canyon corridor seemed to be rapidly closing in around them. Luke held tight to the controls as he searched for any way around Fixer's skyhopper, his eyes darting from his scopes to the high-speed blur in front of his canopy. Angry with himself for having fallen behind, Luke said, "It's too narrow to get past him!"

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Windy said, "Whatever you do, don't go for altitude! Don't go for altitude! The crosswinds will smash us right into the canyon wall!"

Fixer's voice crackled. "Just make yourself comfortable back there, farm boy! It'll all be over in a minute!"

Luke snarled, "That's what *you* think!" He brought his T-16 up fast and veered around a rocky outcropping.

"Wha—Wait!" Windy gasped from behind. "Hey, you idiot! You took the wrong turn! You're headed for the Stone Needle!"

"Yeah," Luke said. "I bet we shave five seconds off our time."

"You're gonna kill us both!"

The Stone Needle came into view. As the distance closed between the skyhopper's nose and the Needle's jagged opening, Luke instinctively realized he was going too fast. With his left hand, he reached for a switch to cut power and shut down the afterburners, and the T-16 decelerated and dropped slightly. Then Luke kicked on the power again.

"There's no going back now," Luke said as the T-16 closed with the opening. "Stay gripped, Windy!"

The skyhopper was suddenly buffeted by crosswinds. Windy yelled, "*No-oooo!*"

Luke clutched the controls with almost crushing strength as he kept his trajectory for the opening. As the skyhopper tore through the Needle, Luke let out a whoop of excitement that was so loud he almost drowned out a series of nasty thuds, the sound of metal grinding and breaking against stone.

Incredibly, they were still airborne.

"We made it!" Luke said. "Windy, open your eyes! We made it!"

"I-I'm alive," Windy stammered. "I don't believe it." Then he braved a glance at Luke's console. "Hey! Your stabilizer's gone!"

Luke felt the skyhopper begin to lean hard to the port side. Tugging at the controls to compensate for the lean, he said, "I can hold her. We've still got to cross that finish line."

"You'll crash us!"

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“Here we go....”

Luke saw the end of the course and revved down the engine for landing. The skyhopper hit the ground at a slight angle, jolting Luke and Windy, then bounced over the finish line before it hit the ground again. Luke’s skyhopper kicked up a wide spray of dust as it slid to a stop.

“I *told* you I could bring her in,” Luke said as the engines died down. Catching his breath, he added, “Hey...Windy...we won!” He laughed. “We *won*!”

“Won?” Windy gasped. “Luke, you’re crazy. Crazy! I’m riding home with one of the others.” He scrambled out of his seat and opened the hatch. “You’re just an accident looking for a place to happen.”

Luke was still laughing wildly as Windy staggered away from the skyhopper. He tilted his head back and said, “Oh, Biggs, you should’ve been here!”

Chapter Seven

Luke was on the south range of his uncle's moisture farm, working alongside a WED Treadwell droid to repair a broken moisture vaporator, when his eye caught a bright sparkle in the morning sky. Stepping away from the vaporator, he removed his macrobinoculars from his utility belt to get a better look.

He spotted two points of light and quickly adjusted his macrobinoculars' magnification. Although the two points remained indistinct, he could tell that they were starships, and that one was considerably larger than the other. Pulses of light flashed near and around the smaller ship.

Luke realized he was witnessing a space battle. He could hardly believe his eyes. Lowering his macrobinoculars, he glanced at the Treadwell droid and said, "Come on, Treadwell. Get yourself over to the landspeeder. I've gotta get into Anchorhead and tell Fixer about this!"

The Treadwell droid was right in the middle of making an adjustment to the vaporator. It swiveled its binocular photoreceptors to watch Luke run to the landspeeder that was parked a short distance away, and emitted a flurry of protesting beeps.

Although Luke didn't know exactly what the droid had just said, he recognized the tone well enough to understand that it

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was reluctant to stop working. He said, “Well, get it in gear, will ya?”

Like most of the equipment owned by Owen Lars, the droid was in need of repair, so Luke wasn’t totally surprised when its engine suddenly exploded in a spray of sparks. As white smoke poured out of the Treadwell’s engine, the spindly-necked droid beeped furiously.

“Stay put, then,” Luke said. “I’ll pick you up on the way home.” He hopped into his landspeeder and took off across the desert, heading west for Anchorhead.

“I’ve told you kids to slow down!” an old woman hollered as she shook her fist after the landspeeder, which raced at a ridiculously fast speed toward Tosche Station. Luke swerved and brought his vehicle to a sudden stop, kicking up a wave of sand and dust.

He leaped out of the speeder and ran into the pourstone building, taking his macrobinoculars with him. Entering the station’s sales office, he found Fixer seated with Camie, behind a cluttered table. Fixer was asleep, and Camie looked like she was just waking up. Luke picked up a piece of scrap from the table and tossed it at Fixer, but Camie’s hand darted out to swat the scrap to the floor. The sudden movement made Fixer’s eyes pop open.

“C’mon, shape it up, you guys!” Luke said as he moved toward the adjoining room, where Windy and Deak stood facing each other over a large console as they played a computer game. Beside Deak, another man stood with his back to Luke. The man had dark hair and wore a cape over a drab uniform, and he looked like... “Biggs?”

Biggs Darklighter turned with a broad grin on his face. He threw his arms around Luke, who exclaimed, “Hey! I didn’t know you were back! When did you get in?”

“Just now!” Biggs said, beaming as he stepped back to look at Luke. “I never expected you to be out *working!*”

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They both laughed at this. Luke didn't notice any obvious change in Biggs's appearance, so he said, "The Academy didn't change you much....Oh, I almost forgot. There's a battle going on! Right here in our system! Come and look!"

Hearing Luke mention a battle, Deak groaned, "Not again! Forget it!"

Windy said, "Hey, what's all the noise about?"

As Biggs left the computer console, Deak pointed to him and said, "Did you come back down here to play the game?"

Luke ignored Deak and Windy and headed for the exit with Biggs right behind him. As Fixer and Camie followed them out, Camie muttered, "I think Wormie's caught too much sun."

Luke led the others onto the elevated terrace that wrapped around the station. While Fixer and Camie raised their hands to shield their eyes from the sun, Luke trained his macrobinoculars high into the sky and resighted the pinpoints of light. "There they are!" he said, then quickly handed the macrobinoculars to Biggs.

"Let's see," Biggs said. He craned his neck back and gazed up through the powerful lenses. A moment later, he said, "That's no battle, hotshot...they're just sitting there!" Handing the macrobinoculars back to Luke, he added, "Probably a freighter-tanker refueling."

"But there was a lot of firing earlier," Luke said. He was about to look through his macrobinoculars again when Camie snatched them from his hand. Annoyed, Luke said, "Hey!"

While Camie looked through the macrobinoculars, Biggs said, "I tell you, Luke, the Rebellion is a long way from here. *This* planet...?" He shrugged. "Big hunk of nothing."

Fixer added, "I doubt the Empire would even fight to save this system."

Biggs headed back into the station with Fixer right behind him. Camie lowered the macrobinoculars and casually tossed the expensive device to Luke. Luke reached fast to catch them, but

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they nearly slipped from his fingers. Glaring at Camie, he snapped, "You watch it!"

As Camie walked back inside, Luke cast another glance upward and thought, *I know it was a battle. I'm sure of it!*

Later, after getting some drinks at Tosche Station's small cantina, Luke and Biggs walked outside. Luke was just finishing his account of his most recent race at Beggar's Canyon.

"So I cut my power," Luke said, "shut down the afterburners....I was so close, I thought I was going to fry my instruments. As it was, I busted up the skyhopper pretty bad. Uncle Owen? Furious! He wound up grounding me for the rest of the season." He chuckled Biggs on the shoulder. "You should have been there! It was fantastic!"

"You ought to take it a little easy, Luke," Biggs said. "You may be the hottest bush pilot this side of Mos Eisley, but those little skyhoppers are dangerous. Keep it up, one day...whammo! You're gonna end up a dark spot on the down side of a canyon wall."

"Look who's talking," Luke said, grinning. "You've been hanging around the starfleet so long you're beginning to sound like my uncle. You know, you're getting a little soft in the city..."

Biggs gave Luke a playful shove. "I've missed you, kid."

"Yeah, well, things haven't been the same without you, Biggs." Luke kicked at the ground. "It's been so quiet."

Biggs glanced over his shoulder to make sure no one else was in earshot, then said, "Luke, I didn't come back just for a visit." He looked at the ground for a moment, then lifted his gaze to Luke. "I shouldn't tell you this, but you're the only one I can trust. See, I may never come back, and I just want someone to know."

Luke just stood there, looking at Biggs, wondering what had brought on his friend's sudden seriousness. Confused and alarmed, he said, "What are you talking about?"

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Biggs threw another cautious glance over his shoulder, then looked back at Luke. Lowering his voice to a whisper, he said, "I made some friends at the Academy. When our frigate leaves for one of the central systems, I'm gonna jump ship and join the Alliance."

Luke was stunned. "The *Rebellion*?"

Biggs gripped Luke's arm. "Quiet down, will ya? You got a mouth bigger than a meteor crater!"

"I'm quiet, I'm quiet," Luke said, recovering fast and lowering his voice to a rushed whisper. "Listen how quiet I am. You can barely hear me."

Biggs grinned and shook his head before he continued. "My friend has a friend on Bestine who might help us make contact."

"You're crazy," Luke said. "You could wander around forever trying to find them."

Biggs walked off with Luke in tow. "I know it's a long shot," Biggs said, raising his voice. "But if I don't find them, I'll do what I can on my own." Then he stopped to face his friend and said, "It's what we always talked about, Luke. I'm not going to wait around for the Empire to draft me into service. The Rebellion is spreading, and I want to be on the side I believe in."

"Yeah," Luke said. "Meanwhile, I'm stuck here." He started to shuffle off. Biggs followed.

"You'll get your chance to get off this rock," Biggs said. "You're going to the Academy next term, aren't you?"

"Not likely," Luke said. "I had to cancel my application."

"What for?"

"My uncle needs me."

Having heard that excuse too many times, Biggs groaned and rolled his eyes.

"No, I'm serious!" Luke said. "The Sand People have been getting really crazy. They've even raided the outskirts of Anchorhead!"

"Come on, Luke," Biggs said. "Your uncle could hold off a whole colony of Sand People with one blaster."

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Luke glowered. "I know. But we've almost got enough vaporators to make the place pay off. I have to stay one more season. I can't leave him now."

"What good's all your uncle's work if the Empire takes it over?" Biggs said. "You know they've already started to nationalize commerce in the central systems? It won't be long before your uncle's just a tenant, slaving for the greater glory of the Empire."

"No, that's not gonna happen here," Luke said. "You said yourself, the Empire won't even mess with this old rock."

"Things can change."

"I wish I *was* going," Luke said sullenly. "Are you going to be around long?"

Biggs shook his head. "No. I'm leaving in the morning."

"Then I guess I won't see you."

"Maybe someday," Biggs said. He clapped Luke on the back. "I'll keep a lookout."

"Yeah," Luke said. Then he brightened and said, "I'll be at the Academy soon enough...and then, who knows? I won't be drafted into the Imperial Starfleet, that's for sure." He extended his hand to Biggs. "Well, take it easy, buddy," he said as they shook hands. "You'll always be the best friend I've ever had."

"So long, Luke," Biggs said. Then he walked off, his cape flapping at his back.

Watching Biggs walk away, Luke wondered if it might indeed be the last time he'd ever see his friend. He also wondered if he really ever would make it off Tatooine.

The day after Luke witnessed the orbital space battle through his macrobinoculars, a group of Jawa merchants sold two droids to Owen Lars. One of the droids, an astromech unit named R2-D2, carried a secret message for someone named Obi-Wan Kenobi.

And Luke Skywalker's life was forever changed.

Interlude

"Excuse me, Master Luke," C-3PO said as he and R2-D2 entered Luke's quarters on the New Hope. "Would you know where I might find Captain Solo? He told me to wait for him in the main galley. I waited, but...he never arrived. I'm afraid I can't find him anywhere."

"I don't know why he wanted you to wait there," Luke said, "but Han and Chewie are delivering supplies to some allies in the Outer Rim. They left in the Falcon over an hour ago."

"Left!" C-3PO said indignantly.

R2-D2 emitted a string of blurring beeps.

C-3PO glanced at the astromech beside him and said, "You don't have to tell me I told you so!" The golden droid shook his head with dismay. "Sometimes, I get the distinct impression that Captain Solo deliberately misleads me. Come along, Artoo."

As the two droids made their exit, Luke grinned. Although he had come to regard C-3PO and R2-D2 as valued friends, he recalled that he hadn't been very impressed when he'd first met them on Tatooine. At the time, he'd been more interested in the prospect of getting some power converters at Tosche Station. But his view of them had changed when he'd learned of their escape from a Rebel Alliance ship, and then R2-D2 had projected a fragment of a holographic message from an imperiled princess.

Luke would never forget the swift series of events that had followed...

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His reunion with Ben Kenobi in the Jundland Wastes, and his first awareness of the Force.

His horrific discovery of the charred remains of Owen and Beru, slain by Imperial stormtroopers who had been searching for the fugitive droids.

Meeting Han Solo and Chewbacca at Mos Eisley Spaceport, and escaping into space on the Millennium Falcon.

The realization that the Empire had obliterated the planet Alderaan.

The rescue of Princess Leia, and the death of Ben Kenobi on the Death Star.

The battle at Yavin, which had taken the lives of so many Rebel pilots, including Biggs Darklighter, shot down by Darth Vader in the Death Star's trench...

Over the course of just several fateful days, Luke had gained new allies and a sense of purpose. He had been transformed from a Tatooine farmboy into an enemy of the Empire and a hero of the Rebellion. But as he thought of Ben, Owen, Beru, and Biggs, he lowered his head sadly. He still had a hard time believing they were gone.

Granted, he hadn't entirely lost Ben. The Jedi had become one with the Force, and he endured as a spiritual entity who materialized infrequently. Although Luke could never predict when Ben's spirit might contact him, he sometimes sensed the Jedi's presence through the Force.

In the aftermath of the battle at Yavin, Luke had gone on several secret missions. On an assignment to infiltrate an Imperial base on Kalist VI, he was surprised to be reunited with his childhood friend Tank, who was by then a lieutenant in the Imperial Army. Although Tank had embraced the ideals of the Empire and attempted to turn Luke over to Darth Vader, he ultimately helped Luke save Leia during an Imperial attack.

While investigating a report of a new Imperial superweapon at the Starship Yards of Fondor, Luke met a lovely young woman, Tanith Shire, who worked as a supply-tug operator. The superweapon turned out to be an immense Star Destroyer that would eventually be used as Darth Vader's personal flagship, and Tanith helped Luke escape a trap that Vader had set for him. He and Tanith had parted with a kiss at a spaceport on the planet Kabal.

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Once he'd returned to Yavin 4, Luke fought a hulking humanoid monster that he and other Rebels had come to call the Night Beast after it had made a series of nocturnal attacks. Impervious to blasterfire, the Night Beast turned out to be the long-dormant guardian of the Massassi, the original inhabitants of the ancient temple that the Alliance had transformed into their command headquarters. Fortunately, Luke had been able to use the Force to reach out and calm the creature. The Night Beast was placed on a Rebel transport so that it might deliver him to a reunion with the descendants of the Massassi.

Not long after that incident, a wounded Rebel agent returned from a mission to Aridus, which was how Luke had first learned of the desert planet that the New Hope currently orbited. According to the agent, an old man wielding a lightsaber had saved him from a squad of stormtroopers, and his rescuer had identified himself as Ben Kenobi. C-3PO had traveled with Luke in a small smuggling ship to Aridus, where they'd soon discovered that "Kenobi" was really an actor hired by Darth Vader to lure Luke into yet another trap.

Luke wondered, Was Vader trying to capture me because he sensed I was the pilot who destroyed the Death Star, or did he know even then that I was his son? Luke sighed. He doubted he would ever learn the answers to even half the questions he had about his father.

Luke's quarters had a small viewport, and he gazed through it to see Aridus. He recalled how he and C-3PO had left the planet on their smuggling ship but almost immediately found themselves in unknown, and even more dangerous, territory....

Chapter Eight

“We’re in trouble, Threepio,” Luke said, surveying the dead control console in their ship’s cockpit. “Anything those Imperials we escaped *didn’t* knock out, this crash has. No communicator, no power...no heat.”

Luke and C-3PO had barely managed to flee Aridus in their ship before a squadron of Imperial TIE fighters sighted them and opened fire. Their ship had taken a severe pounding, but Luke had evaded the fighters by flying into the slipstream of a passing comet. The comet had carried them far across space at an incredible speed until it had entered a near collision course with an immense ice world in a star system that wasn’t even on most galactic charts. The planet’s gravitational pull had caused the comet to fragment before impact, but it had still taken all of Luke’s piloting skills to make a crash landing.

Now the ship rested in a snow-filled valley beneath rocky cliffs. It was bad enough that Luke didn’t know where they were and the engines were damaged beyond repair, but there wasn’t any way to summon help either. He couldn’t expect Princess Leia or anyone else at Rebel headquarters to find him. The other Rebels probably thought he was still on Aridus. They would never be able to trace his haphazard journey to the ice world.

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He glanced out the viewport and saw a massive wall of dark clouds approaching over the frozen terrain. Stepping past C-3PO, he opened the ship's emergency locker and was relieved to find that it was stocked with insulated clothes and cold-weather survival equipment. C-3PO said, "Sir, my sensors indicate a steady and rapid decline in temperature. Night is approaching, I fear."

"More than night, Threepio," Luke said as pulled on a thermal jacket. "Look on the horizon. We've got a blizzard coming our way...fast."

C-3PO peered out the viewport while Luke tugged a snug hat over his head. Luke half expected the usually nervous droid to start trembling at the sight of the incoming storm, but C-3PO said in a reassuring tone, "Even wrecked, the ship is *some* shelter, Master Luke. Surely, with your thermal gear, you can weather whatever this dreadful ice world hurls at us."

"We'll find out soon, Threepio," Luke said. Although he had various regrets about his mission to Aridus, he had not been greatly bothered by the torrid climate that was so similar to Tatooine's. On the ice planet, warmth existed only as a memory.

He placed an emergency heat capsule in a small cylindrical furnace, set the device on the floor, and hunkered down beside it. Even with the thermal clothes on, he was colder than he'd ever been in his life.

"We could be much worse off, sir," C-3PO said, trying to sound cheery despite the storm that raged outside. "Suppose the comet had actually struck this miserable snowball of a world instead of narrowly missing it." Gazing out the viewport at the snow that had already almost completely covered their ship, he added, "And it's certainly the last place the Empire would look for anyone. Correct, Master Luke?"

C-3PO turned to face Luke, who remained seated beside the small furnace. Luke shivered as he stared at the furnace's dimming light. "Th-this is our last heat...emergency heat

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capsule,” he stammered. “After it goes...don’t know...h-how much longer...I’ll be around, Threepio.” Without knowing why, he lowered one trembling hand to his side to touch his lightsaber. He realized he felt some comfort just knowing that it was still clipped to his belt.

My father’s lightsaber.

C-3PO was silent for a moment, then said, “The extreme cold must be playing havoc with my sensor circuitry. I could swear I detected something moving outside! Perhaps you should take a look, Master Luke...?”

Luke slumped and collapsed on the floor beside the exhausted furnace.

He awoke to the sound of unfamiliar voices, and the smell and texture of oily fur against his face. He was still in his thermal clothes, his body draped over the body of a large creature. He didn’t know how long he’d been unconscious or where he was, except that he was no longer in the ship.

He kept very still as he opened one eye. He saw that he was in some kind of ice cavern. It had a generator and other machinery in it. He could also see C-3PO standing beside a girl who wore a parka with a fur-lined hood, and also a man with a dark beard and thinning hair. The man wore a broad scarf around his neck and a gray tunic that was unmistakably an Imperial-issue officer’s uniform. Luke guessed that the girl was near his own age. He kept his eye open and remained motionless as he listened to the man speak.

“You disobeyed me, Frija,” the man said, “and jeopardized our safety! Fortunately, my experience as Imperial governor endows me with enough wisdom and resolve for both of us.”

An Imperial governor? Luke wondered how and why the man had come to be so far from Imperial space.

The man drew a sleek blaster pistol from a holster at his belt, aimed the weapon at C-3PO, and said, “Droid, dump your

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injured master outside in the storm. Then report back for dismantling.”

Before C-3PO could respond, the girl said, “Father, I won’t let you harm this droid or his master! They’ve crashed on Hoth as we did. They’re no threat!”

Hoth. Luke had never heard the planet’s name before.

The girl moved closer to her father, placing her gloved hand on his wrist to make him lower the blaster. “I need the company of someone my own age! Someone young...attractive...”

“You’re talking nonsense, Frija!” the man said as he yanked his wrist away, holding tight to the blaster. “Our survival depends on remaining alone! Trust me to eliminate this problem as an Imperial governor should!”

“Father, please!” Frija said. “I wasn’t meant to be isolated and alone as we are here. I need friends...companionship...”

“I know what’s best, Frija,” the man said as he swung the blaster in Luke’s direction. “Our safety cannot be imperiled for the sake of some half-frozen young fool!”

Luke had heard and seen enough. He swung his left leg up over the creature’s back and then flung himself at the armed man. Luke caught the man around the neck and shoulders, but the man moved with surprising speed, bending fast to flip Luke onto the floor.

Luke gasped as he hit the floor. He realized he was still weak. As he began to push himself up, his attacker leveled the blaster at him.

“Your efforts gained you one thing, my overeager young troublemaker,” the man said. “Death by blaster instead of being left to slowly freeze in Hoth’s night storms.”

But before the man could fire, Luke’s arm swung up from his side with dazzling swiftness as his own weapon ignited. The blaster shattered in the man’s grip.

The man looked dazed as his gaze traveled from his now-empty hand to Luke’s weapon. “W-what?”

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"A lightsaber," Luke said. "Weapon of the Jedi Knights. Funny...I'd think you were the right age to remember them." Keeping the lightsaber activated and his eyes fixed on the man's stunned face, Luke said, "Threepio, find their communicator and signal for help."

"You'll find that impossible, my young hero," the man said with a scowl. "You're stranded on Hoth."

"Pay no attention, Threepio. Just find their communicator. A few quick bleeps on our emergency signal frequency will bring help without alerting the Empire."

As Threepio tottered off toward a clustered array of technological equipment, the man glared at Luke and said, "Young fool. There's no danger of alerting *anyone*."

A moment later, C-3PO stepped away from the equipment and said, "I've found their communicator, sir. Only, it's as hopelessly damaged as the one on our wrecked ship!"

Still facing the man, Luke said, "All your other equipment is okay. I think you've deliberately isolated yourself on Hoth."

The man sneered. "And you've joined us against my will."

Frija had pulled back her hood to reveal her face. Luke noticed that she had incredibly beautiful eyes, an icy blue that was strangely appropriate for their cold surroundings. He was surprised that she was so pretty, especially in contrast to her foul-tempered father. He deactivated his lightsaber but continued to watch the older man cautiously.

Looking at her father, Frija said, "He could have killed you and didn't. That proves he's not dangerous."

"His mere arrival has turned you against me, child," the man said sadly. "I deserted the Empire to save us, and letting mere loneliness attract you to this young fool is going to ruin that!" He threw an angry, defiant gaze at Luke.

Luke had noticed an enclosed cabin with a heavy metal door. He gestured to it and said, "Lock him up, Threepio. I've got an idea...."

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The next morning, the skies were clear as Luke and Frija left the cavernous hideout. They were mounted on a pair of tauntauns, reptomammals that were native to Hoth. Luke rode the same tauntaun that had carried him to the cave from his crashed ship. Frija had readily agreed to guide him back to his ship, although he had yet to explain the reason for their journey and why he had brought two empty saddle packs.

As the icy winds whipped at them, Luke said, "What were you doing away from your, uh, home when you found me and Threepio?"

"I was just out riding," Frija said. "I do that sometimes, just to get away for a while. Where you come from, did you ever just go riding?"

Luke recalled his old landspeeder as he squinted at the bright landscape. "Yeah, only it was warmer outside. *A lot* warmer." He smiled. "Frija, I'll never be able to fully thank you for saving me."

"I'm afraid I almost didn't. When I found your ship, I snuck up to it and looked through the window. I saw you lying on the floor. Your droid was trying to revive you. Naturally, I wanted to help, but then I thought of my father, and how he would react. And then...I climbed back on my tauntaun and I started to ride away."

"But you came back," Luke said. "Why?"

Frija's tauntaun made a grumbling sound, and she patted the side of the beast's neck. "Because I'm not my father," she said. "I couldn't let you die. I just couldn't."

Luke smiled at her. "You're very brave."

"That's kind of you to say," Frija said sadly. "But I'd be a liar if I said I didn't have a selfish interest in keeping you alive. Last night, I thought you were still unconscious up until you jumped off the tauntaun to stop my father, but...I guess you were awake, and you heard me, what I said about...needing someone young and attractive? To keep me company?"

Luke blushed. "Yeah," he said. "I did hear you say that."

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“But I didn’t mean that I needed just anyone,” Frija said hastily. “I mean, I’m really, really glad I found *you*.”

“Me too,” Luke said, liking the girl more and more.

“There’s your ship,” Frija said, pointing to a distant gray spot in a wide white valley below their position. A fresh dusting of snow rested on the crashed vessel, which lay at an angle near a rocky outcropping.

As they rode down a hill toward the wreckage, Luke said, “Why didn’t your father seek refuge with the Rebel Alliance, Frija?”

“He hates both sides.”

Luke looked at Frija, expecting her to explain, but she didn’t. Although he was curious about the reasons for her father’s actions, he didn’t want to upset Frija with too many questions.

A moment later, Frija interrupted the silence. “I’m sorry about our communicator, Luke. My father smashed it when we first arrived here.”

Luke shook his head. “He’s sure serious about isolating the two of you from the Empire *and* the Rebellion. But I think I’ve got a solution to the problem, especially since Threepio locked him away where he can’t interfere.”

As their tauntauns arrived at the crash site, Frija said, “Luke, I’m willing to defy my father to help you, except...what can we do here?”

“Yeah, my ship’s communicator is as useless as yours,” Luke said. “However, between the two, I bet we can cannibalize enough parts for a working model.”

They dismounted the tauntauns and entered the ship. Once inside, Frija huddled beside Luke while he began disassembling the components he needed. Despite the freezing temperature, Luke could feel the warmth of Frija’s breath against the side of his face.

It didn’t take long for Luke to gather the necessary components. When he was finished, he said, “That does it, Frija. With the parts we’ve salvaged from this wreck’s communicator,

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combined with the damaged one back at your cave, I'm sure I'll be signaling the Rebel Alliance in no time."

"It's wonderful working with you, Luke," Frija said. "Actually sharing some *purpose*...instead of just existing in isolation day after day as my father insists I do."

Frija helped carry the parts out to the tauntauns and load them into the saddle packs Luke had brought. "You don't know how happy I've been today," she said, "sharing your company, doing meaningful work."

"Hoth is a great place for hiding from the Empire, Frija," he said as he secured the packs, "but for a young girl like you to be isolated here is—"

A man's voice interrupted, "Her father's business! Which you've interfered with for the last time!"

Luke and Frija turned fast to see the renegade Imperial governor staring down at them from atop the nearby outcropping. The governor held a blaster rifle.

Luke had no idea how the governor had escaped from the base. He hoped that C-3PO was undamaged.

"Father, leave us alone!" Frija cried. "I'm happy helping Luke!"

"He'll soon bring his Rebel friends swarming, Frija, and the Imperials won't be far behind. The war I deserted the Empire to *save* us from will be right here on Hoth! You'll thank me for this later, child."

The governor aimed his rifle at Luke, who was standing within arm's reach of Frija. At the same moment the governor squeezed the trigger, Frija threw her body against Luke's and shouted, "No!"

The energy beam crashed into the ground near the feet of the two tumbling figures, and the explosive noise echoed through the valley. Luke rolled quickly to his feet and pulled Frija up from the snow.

"Frija! You almost took that blast meant for me!"

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“I won’t let him hurt you, Luke!” Frija said. “He won’t dare shoot again if I’m right beside you!”

“I can’t take that chance,” Luke said. He pointed to the tauntauns. “Get out of here, Frija. I don’t know where the governor got that blaster, but it’s me he wants, not you. I can handle him.”

Frija hesitated for just a moment. Then she grabbed the reins for Luke’s tauntaun and jumped up onto the back of her own.

The governor said, “I’ve weapons hidden in every compartment of our ice cave, Skywalker. That’s how I blasted my way out of confinement! I knew the day would come when Rebels or Imperials would threaten our safety here.” He took aim and fired again.

Luke leaped aside as the next energy beam slammed into the icy ground. As the governor prepared to fire once more, Luke looked at Frija and the tauntauns, who hadn’t budged. “He’s berserk!” Luke said. “Get those communicator parts to Threepio! I’ll draw your father’s fire!”

Hearing this, the governor said, “Communicator parts!”

Frija dug her boots into her tauntaun’s sides while she tugged the reins for the other tauntaun. Just as the beasts began moving away from Luke and the wrecked ship, another blaster shot rang out.

The blast caught Frija in the back. She fell from her mount and collapsed against the snow.

Luke gasped.

The governor lowered his rifle. “Frija!” he cried. “No! I wanted to hit the pack with the communicator parts!”

Luke was outraged. He was already running for the governor as he drew and ignited his lightsaber. The governor heard the lightsaber’s energized hum and turned to see Luke’s approach. Glaring at the governor, Luke said bitterly, “You wanted to keep her cut off on this planet so badly you killed her!”

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“It’s *your* fault my daughter turned against me!” the governor snapped. “It’s your fault I had to shoot her...and now you’ll die for it!” He raised his rifle.

Luke had no choice but to swing his lightsaber. Its blade met the rifle’s barrel just as the governor squeezed the trigger. The rifle jerked as it backfired a split second before the lightsaber swept through the sleeve of the governor’s tunic and across the back of his right hand.

The governor collapsed in the snow and lay motionless.

Luke stood over the governor’s body. He hadn’t meant to cut the man down, only disable his rifle. Luke was amazed that he had somehow avoided the rifle’s blast, but he was even more stunned by what he saw through the torn fabric across the governor’s chest.

Wires?

Luke bent down beside the lifeless form. The governor’s open wound exposed not only wires but other mechanical components. Luke noticed that a layer of synthetic flesh had peeled away from the back of the governor’s right hand to reveal bare metal fingers and joints.

He’s...an elaborate sort of droid!

“Luke?”

It was Frija, calling weakly from where she’d fallen. Both tauntauns remained standing a short distance from her.

Leaving the governor’s body, Luke ran through the snow until he arrived at the girl’s side. As he knelt down next to her, he saw that one of her hands was also an exposed tangle of wires and robotic metal fingers.

Frija was trying to push herself up from the ground. Luke’s eyes met her ice blue gaze. At first he wasn’t sure what to say. Then he saw her lower lip tremble.

“Frija,” he said. “I never meant for anything to happen to you or your father.”

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“Don’t blame yourself, Luke!” Frija said. “We’re both mechanical...created by Imperial technicians.” She coughed, exhaling steam into the frigid air.

Luke eased his arm under her back to elevate her head and shoulders. As he held her close against him, she continued, “We were designed to be decoys...programmed to imitate the *real* governor and his daughter so they could flee a Rebel attack.” She lifted her eyebrows. “Perhaps we were programmed too perfectly. My father’s survival instincts were so strong he had us escape instead.” She coughed again. “The Empire designed my father and me to be *targets* for the Rebels. That’s why he hated both sides.”

Luke shook his head. “If I hadn’t crashed here, Frija, the two of you would be living safely and happily.”

“No,” Frija said. “Merely existing. And we weren’t created to last long.” She raised her hand and pressed her robotic fingers against the sleeve of Luke’s jacket.

Luke reached for her hand and held it in his own.

“You brought purpose and enjoyment to the time I had,” Frija said. “Don’t regret what happened here, Luke. I thank you for it.”

She coughed again, and Luke felt her hand go slack.

“Rebuild the communicator,” Frija said, “and summon your friends. I’m sorry my father fought so against you...but I’m glad you came to Hoth.”

“For the chance to have known you, Frija, so am I...so am I.”

Frija closed her eyes, and her head tilted back.

Luke just sat there for a moment, holding Frija. He almost didn’t notice the snowflakes that had begun to fall from the darkening sky. And then he heard C-3PO calling to him.

Although C-3PO had been unable to prevent the governor from escaping the cave, he had followed the tracks through the snow until he arrived at the crash site. Greatly relieved to find Luke unharmed, he listened with interest as Luke told him that

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Frija and her father had been mechanical beings, and then explained why her father had been so angered by Luke's arrival.

When Luke was finished, C-3PO said, "Fortunately, Frija didn't share her father's hatreds, sir. She seemed *particularly* happy with you."

"Thanks to her, we'll leave Hoth soon, Threepio," Luke said. He lifted Frija's body carefully from the ground.

C-3PO noticed Frija's exposed robotic hand. "Most remarkable," he said. "I believe the Alliance scientists will be quite interested in learning about this human replica droid."

"But they won't," Luke said. He turned his head so the golden droid wouldn't see his grief-stricken expression. "I'm going to bury her. And her father."

After Luke and C-3PO returned with the tauntauns to the ice cave, Luke had no difficulty patching together a makeshift communicator. He quickly notified the Alliance of his whereabouts and proposed that they relocate their headquarters to the remote ice world. Soon he was reunited with his friends, and the Alliance Corps of Engineers went to work, expanding the original ice cave and creating many larger ones.

He had no need to tell the engineers about the two graves near his crash site, an area already covered by a fresh, heavy layer of snow. And although he could only ever imagine why his uncle had removed the headstones from the family plot on Tatooine, he realized that he cherished his memories of Frija more than he felt compelled to leave a monument on Hoth that would eventually give way to time.

He left both graves unmarked.

Chapter Nine

“Help!” a woman screamed from across the forest. “Please! Someone! Help!”

Luke was surprised to hear any stranger’s voice. Because the *Millennium Falcon*’s sensors had not detected any evidence of civilization on the jungle planet, he hadn’t expected to encounter any intelligent life forms. Without hesitation, he turned and bolted through dense foliage, running toward the unseen woman.

Luke, Han Solo, Chewbacca, C-3PO, and R2-D2 had been on the *Falcon*, traveling with the Rebel fleet after hastily evacuating their former base on Yavin 4. They had guided the fleet to a hyperspace jump point that would take them directly to their new base on the ice planet Hoth. Unfortunately, when they had attempted to follow the other ships through hyperspace, the *Falcon*’s navigational computer had gone haywire. The *Falcon* had emerged from hyperspace in an unknown sector, and the crew had been forced to land on the uncharted world to make repairs to the navicomputer as well as the hyperdrive.

Han had been anxious about the planet even before they’d landed. He maintained that trouble always had a way of finding them on apparently peaceful worlds, and he had encouraged Luke to scout around to make sure that nothing unpleasant would interrupt their work on the *Falcon*. Initially, all Luke had

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found were strangely beautiful plants, towering trees, and a few small nonthreatening creatures. He had been musing that Han's anxiety was unfounded—before the woman's scream pierced the tranquil forest.

Luke vaulted over a thick, fungus-covered root of an enormous tree to arrive at the edge of a clearing. He found himself facing a monstrous plant with an eyeless, bulbous head and a gaping maw. Long tentacle-like tendrils extended from beneath the head, and one tendril was coiled around a terrified girl. She had fair skin and blond hair, and her scant clothing appeared to be made from animal skins. To Luke's astonishment, he recognized her.

Tanith Shire?

He hadn't seen Tanith since they'd gone their separate ways at a spaceport on the planet Kabal, where they'd parted with a kiss. She'd been wearing more conventional clothes at the time.

Luke ignited his lightsaber and rushed the carnivorous plant. His blade swept through one tendril, but then another appendage lashed out and struck his wrist so hard that the lightsaber was knocked from his grasp. As the lightsaber fell to the forest floor, Luke found himself suddenly lifted off his feet by the powerful monster.

The tendrils snaked and constricted around Luke's body. He managed to extend his right hand over the grip of his holstered blaster pistol, but the monster pinned his arms to his sides. Desperate to reach his blaster, he extended his fingers as far as he could.

Luke still had much to learn about the power of the Force. He wasn't even trying to use the Force when the pistol sailed out of its holster into his waiting grip. As the monster twisted and tightened its hold on him, Luke squeezed the blaster's trigger.

He shot the monster at point-blank range. It let out a rasping shriek, and then all of its tendrils went slack. Luke rolled away from the creature. As he pushed himself up from the ground, he was surprised to see Tanith running off into the forest.

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“Tanith!” Luke called out. “What are you doing? Come back!” But she did not pause. Wondering if the girl was in shock or required medical attention, Luke recovered his lightsaber, holstered his blaster, and then ran after her.

Luke wondered how Tanith had wound up on the jungle planet. He couldn’t understand why she was running away from him. *Doesn’t she recognize me?*

“Tanith!”

Broad-leaved plants whipped at Luke as he raced through the jungle. He’d lost sight of Tanith in the shadows of the surrounding growth. Ducking under the fleshy, umbrella-shaped cap of a tall fungus, he suddenly spotted her again. She was running straight for the ledge of a high cliff.

“No!” Luke yelled as he sprinted after the girl. She stopped short at the edge and turned, allowing Luke to see her frightened face. Luke leaped forward, grabbing her arm in an effort to haul her back from the edge, but then she lost her footing and fell backward, pulling Luke with her.

They fell and plunged into the water of a deep, swiftly moving river. Having grown up on Tatooine, Luke was an inexperienced swimmer and had to fight his way to the surface. He saw Tanith flailing ahead of him, her wet hair plastered over her face. As the river carried them downstream, Luke struggled over to her side and caught her by the arm.

“Tanith! Hang on! I’ve got you!” He pulled her toward the shore until he found his footing in the shallows. When they reached the river’s edge, he finally got a good, close look at the girl’s face. Although her eyes were filled with fear, he could see she was very beautiful.

But she wasn’t the girl he remembered.

“You’re not Tanith Shire,” Luke said in a daze as he followed the girl up onto the mucky shore. She backed away from him, cringing. She had long dark hair and a lean face with grayish blue eyes that Luke found strangely haunting. He couldn’t understand why his own eyes had deceived him earlier, not just when he’d

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first seen her, but right up until the moment they'd fallen into the stream.

The girl continued to look at Luke with apprehension. Luke felt slightly dizzy as he faced her from the stream's edge. "What's going on around here?" he asked. "Who are you? What made me think you were Tanith Shire? You don't look similar at all."

"I am S'ybll," the girl said, her voice trembling. "I fear the atmosphere of my world is sometimes too rich. For strangers, almost intoxicating. It is easy to imagine things..."

"It's sure got me confused," Luke said. He looked away from the girl to survey the jungle. "If I mistook you for someone totally different, how much else have I imagined? Wondering all the time if what I see is real or not could turn into quite a...problem!"

Luke's wandering gaze had landed on an Imperial stormtrooper who stood just a short distance away, in the shadow of a tall tree. The white-armored trooper held a blaster rifle that was leveled in the direction of Luke and the unarmed girl.

Luke moved without thinking, pulling his lightsaber from his belt and igniting its energy beam as he leaped at the trooper. The trooper didn't flinch as Luke swung his lightsaber hard and fast through the plastoid armor. Luke was surprised when the shattered armor instantly fell away to reveal that it had been stuffed with bundled sticks. The armor and sticks collapsed with a loud clatter.

Luke looked down at the heap that rested at his feet. "S'ybll? This is just an empty suit of stormtrooper armor. Why...?"

"I placed it here, Luke, in hopes it might keep intruders at bay," S'ybll said as she stepped past the armor. "My home is just ahead."

Did she just say my name? Luke didn't remember whether he'd introduced himself to S'ybll, but decided he must have. "Intruders?" he said as he followed her. "What kind of intruders?"

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“My planet appears to be a tropical paradise, but there are dangers...wild beasts and such.”

“But empty stormtrooper armor frightens them off?” Luke asked skeptically.

“Sometimes,” S’yblł said. “Perhaps it is foolish. Still...it is not easy for a woman alone to defend her home.” She gestured to the ruins of an ancient structure that rose from the jungle floor. The structure included a flight of stone steps that led up to a series of architectural columns, some of which were still standing and supported broad lintels. Other columns lay broken. While a number appeared to have fallen, possibly because of erosion over many centuries, a few looked like they’d been deliberately toppled.

Gazing at the timeworn structure, Luke was reminded of the abandoned base on Yavin 4. Then his stomach clenched as he noticed several more propped-up suits of stormtrooper armor. He said, “This is your home, S’yblł?”

“You find it strange I use a ruin as my home?”

“No, S’yblł. Coincidental. Until recently, Rebel Alliance headquarters were in something similar.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Luke realized that he couldn’t remember if he’d mentioned his affiliation with the Alliance to S’yblł. He rubbed his eyes, then gestured to the empty suits of armor. “What I *do* find strange is all this stormtrooper armor...and no stormtroopers. What happened to the men inside?”

“I told you my planet is not quite the paradise it appears, Luke,” S’yblł said as she directed Luke to a clearing beside the ruins. “These Imperials came exploring, and learned just how dangerous this world can be.”

In the clearing rested an Imperial *Lambda*-class shuttle. Covered by thick moss and fungal growth, the vessel’s exterior was heavily battered. However, its wings were raised, and both the landing gear and the ramp were fully deployed.

“The damage to this shuttle didn’t come from a crash, S’yblł.” Luke pointed to the cockpit’s shattered transparisteel canopy.

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"This hole was made from the outside. It'd take something pretty terrible to inflict it." He turned to S'ybl and was taken aback by the concerned look on her face. Hoping to make light of his comment, he said, "First, empty suits of stormtrooper armor to give me a scare...now a smashed Imperial shuttle! You've got weird taste in home decoration, S'ybl."

"This craft landed *long* before I settled in this ruin, Luke Skywalker," S'ybl said testily. "Whatever happened to those soldiers, I merely propped their armor about to frighten off wild creatures."

Luke gulped. "I was only joking, S'ybl," he said. "Didn't mean to insult your defenses. But I doubt they'll stop anything that could damage a ship this way."

Unexpectedly, S'ybl moved close to Luke and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "My planet is full of such dangers, Luke. I need someone to protect me. Someone like *you*."

Luke was surprised by S'ybl's behavior but did not try to move away from her. As she tilted her chin toward the derelict Imperial shuttle, she said, "You *see* the damage done to this ship of the Empire, Luke. Suppose whatever inflicted it returns? I need protection."

"But, S'ybl..."

"I need you," she whispered before she pulled him closer and kissed him.

Luke backed away. "S'ybl...please," he said. "I'll do what I can to help you. But...I have other commitments. To my friends. To the Rebel Alliance...and to..."

S'ybl's eyes suddenly brimmed with tears. Before he could ask her what was wrong, she turned away from him and ran from the shuttle, heading into the ruins.

Flabbergasted, Luke stood beside the shuttle for a moment, then looked off in the direction that S'ybl had fled. Only then did he notice that night had begun to fall. "S'ybl!" he shouted. "Where did you run to? I didn't mean to upset you, but I can't just desert my friends here and—"

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Luke saw a shadowy form pass behind one of the old columns. At first he thought it was S'ybl, but a moment later, the hulking form emerged from the ruins to reveal itself.

It was a humanoid creature, nearly three meters tall, with green skin, long arms, and a massive torso. It had fangs and reptilian eyes. Luke recognized the monster instantly. It was either the Night Beast—the creature he'd previously encountered on Yavin 4—or its identical twin.

The monster growled, then sprang at Luke. Luke leaped away and started running. He tried to reach out to the beast with his mind but could not sense any connection. Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw the monster lift a large block of stone and hurl it.

Luke vaulted over a fallen column to avoid being hit by the flying block. The block smashed into the column. Luke kept running. He considered reaching for his blaster but decided against it. Not just because he recalled that energy weapons had little effect on the Night Beast, but because he didn't know where S'ybl was hiding, and he was afraid an indiscriminate blast might cause a cave-in.

"S'ybl!" Luke shouted as he ran. "Where are you?"

The monster was catching up with him. Despite its incredible resemblance to the Night Beast, Luke was practically certain it wasn't the same creature that had left Yavin 4 on a transport ship. The possibility of finding the Night Beast on such a far-flung world, and so shortly after their last encounter on Yavin 4...Luke couldn't begin to calculate the odds.

Remembering his comlink, Luke decided to summon help from Han and Chewie. Still running, he reached to his belt.

His comlink was gone.

Must've lost it when S'ybl and I fell into the river!

The monster picked up another massive stone and hurled it. The stone crashed into the ground right in front of Luke.

Luke stumbled over the stone and sprinted around the ruins. Arriving at a high, rough wall that was part of the structure's

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foundation, he jumped up and began scaling it. He expected the monster to follow, and he planned on having his lightsaber ready. But as he gripped a chunk of stone and began to pull himself up, the ancient stone crumbled.

“No!” he shouted as he fell backward through the air. He thought the monster was just below his position and that he’d fall right into its arms. Instead, he hit the ground hard. His back and legs took most of the impact but did nothing to stop the back of his head from striking the ground too.

He lay on the ground, the wind knocked out of him. Forcing his eyes open, he saw that the sky overhead was now a deep, dark blue.

He moaned as he rolled over and rubbed the back of his head. As best as he could tell, he hadn’t broken any bones, but just about everything hurt.

And then he remembered the monster. He knew he had to get up fast, before it—

“Luke.”

It was a man’s voice. Still dazed and sprawled on the ground, Luke turned his head and saw the silhouette of a robed figure standing a short distance away, in the shadow of a still-standing column. Luke’s eyes flicked around as he searched for the monster.

“The danger is past, my boy,” the robed man said, “but I’m concerned for your new companion.” The man moved out from the darkness.

He was Ben Kenobi.

“Ben?” Luke gasped. “How...?”

“I’m always with you, young Luke,” Ben said. “And it seems my sudden appearance has driven away the creature which menaced you. But what of your new companion, and the dangers which menace her?”

New companion? It took a moment for Luke to realize whom Ben was talking about. He said, “S’ybl?”

Ben nodded.

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“Ben...I’m still groggy from my fall.” Luke struggled to his feet and looked around anxiously. “How did a monster from my past appear here? Where did it go?”

“There are many monsters here, Luke,” Ben said with a shrug, “even on a planetary paradise such as this. That is why your new friend, S’ybl, needs you, my boy. That is why you *must* go to her.”

Luke clutched his head “Han the droids, Chewbacca, They’re all waiting for me, Ben.”

“There will be time for them later, my boy. For now, it’s S’ybl you must consider. Go to her.”

“She hid before the monster appeared,” Luke said absently as he staggered toward Ben. Glancing up at the ruins, he continued, “Was it here, Ben? You want me...to go here?”

But Ben had vanished.

“Help me,” Luke said. “I feel...so...so weak.” His legs buckled and he fell forward onto the ground.

“B-Ben?”

Luke tried opening his eyes but he saw nothing. Nothing at all. Somehow he had been engulfed by darkness.

His mouth was dry and his entire body ached. Shifting his legs and elbows slightly, he realized he was lying flat on his back against a hard surface.

“I must’ve blacked out,” he muttered aloud. “Where are you, Ben?”

But it wasn’t Ben who answered. It was S’ybl.

“Your friend is gone, Luke,” she said. “But all is fine. He convinced you not to leave but to join me here...here in my hiding place.”

Luke felt her fingers push through his hair. “S’ybl?” he said. “There’s something over my eyes...?”

“Just a damp cloth, Luke. Don’t touch it. You suffered a slight concussion from your fall. Just relax. Let me treat you.”

Her voice sounded so tranquil, comforting...

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Luke felt a supple pressure against his cheek, and then S'ybll's hair brushed against his face. He felt her take his right hand in hers, and she began massaging his fingers.

"Funny, S'ybll," Luke mumbled deliriously. "Ben Kenobi appeared to me...wanted me to find you...help you. But really...you're helping *me*."

"Just relax."

"I felt like...you were kissing me earlier."

"Lie still," S'ybll said soothingly. "I know what I'm doing. I've done this many times before."

Luke smelled something burning. Candles. Maybe dried leaves too. He cleared his throat. "S'ybll, is it still night? You've stayed with me for so long."

"I like being close to you, Luke."

"Didn't think the fall hurt me much," he said. "But...keep feeling weaker."

"Just relax," S'ybll repeated. "Let me treat you. It's best if you have quiet."

And then, unexpectedly, Luke heard C-3PO's voice. "Master Luke? Master Luke!" the droid said. "Are you there, sir? Come in...please!"

Luke was suddenly alert. He tried to push himself up from the flat surface he'd been resting on, and drew one hand toward his face.

"Lie still," S'ybll said. "Don't move. Don't take the cloth from your eyes."

"S'ybll," Luke said, pushing against her shoulder. "That voice. It was one of my droids...Threepio!"

And then C-3PO spoke again. "Artoo-Detoo, I feel most silly doing this. If Master Luke lost his comlink, he can't possibly hear us!"

"My comlink!" Luke said. He sat up fast, pulling the damp cloth from his face as he turned his head in the direction of C-3PO's voice. He was in a gloomy chamber and had been resting on some kind of altar. Smoke was rising from an archaic urn as

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well as from several candles. A stone table was placed near the altar. On the table were his lightsaber, blaster pistol, and comlink.

Luke stared at the comlink. "S'ybl...I thought it fell off...when we plunged into the river from the cliff. The only way it could've gotten here is if you..."

S'ybl pushed Luke aside and snatched up the comlink. Only then did he see her face.

Although she remained attired in the animal skins, the woman who stood before him was a wretched, withered figure, with filthy white hair and deathly pale, wrinkled flesh that was broken with many warts. Spittle flew from her yellow teeth as she snapped, "I *told* you not to take the cloth from your eyes!"

Luke felt light-headed. He blinked as he tried to determine what was real and what wasn't. "You stole my comlink, S'ybl....Hid it here...in your quarters...."

"Yes, Luke," S'ybl said, her voice a low rasp. "Right off your equipment belt. I wanted to use it later, to lure your friends to these ruins after I was through with you."

Luke shook his head. "S'ybl, what's happened to you?"

"You're seeing me as I *am*, Luke. I've always looked this way. Until visitors like you—and an Imperial exploration team before you—arrived to help me. As your friends will arrive...following your comlink." She extended a bony arm to place the comlink on the altar. "It might be difficult dealing with all of you at once, but by the time they're here, I'll be done with you."

Luke backed up cautiously toward the stone table.

"Stand still, Luke," S'ybl said. "You're too weak. Too under my spell to escape now!"

"D-don't know what you've done to me," he stammered as he grabbed his weapons from the table. "But I won't just give up!" He scanned the chamber and sighted a curving flight of stone steps that appeared to be the only exit. Dim light shone down from the top of the stairwell.

"Yes," S'ybl hissed as Luke secured the weapons to his belt. "There's great power in you. I sensed that. It's what attracted me.

Ryder Windham

But it's mostly unformed...you've not yet mastered it. And now you never will!" She lurched forward and threw her arms around him.

Luke gasped. His arms flexed away from his body against his will. He wanted to break away from S'ybl and reach for his weapons, but he couldn't budge.

"Don't fight, Luke. Just give in to my embrace. The pain won't last long."

Her breath was awful. Luke tried to pull himself away from S'ybl, but her arms remained locked around him. As his senses reeled, he thought, *Who...what are you?*

"I'm a mind witch," S'ybl said. "I was ancient when these ruins were new. I can reach into your memories and create illusions to ensnare and weaken you until a psychic link is forged. Then I drain the mental energy from you, the very life essence that will renew me...make me young again! Just as I drained the energy of the Imperial soldiers..."

Luke closed his eyes and struggled to concentrate. He felt S'ybl probing his mind. He thought, *Get out!*

"There's no resisting, Luke. You'll soon be an empty husk. It's too late...even with the Force running so richly within your being."

She knows about the Force!

"The hold of the mind witch is upon you. Give in!"

"No!" Luke shouted as he opened his eyes and flung his arms out, launching S'ybl away from him and sending her to the floor. It took all his concentration to turn for the stone steps. Ignoring a human skull that had been transformed into a candle holder, he began climbing.

As he ascended from the subterranean lair, Luke heard S'ybl's cackle travel up the stairway. "You're strong!" she said. "So much stronger than I suspected. But you're too weak to run far. And with the psychic links I've forged, your very thoughts...your greatest fears...are mine to use against you!"

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Luke saw the exit ahead of him. It was daybreak, and a heavy layer of mist hung in the morning air. S'yblł cackled again, and Luke could still hear her dreadful laughter echoing off the stairwell's walls as he emerged outside, amid the columnar ruins.

Darth Vader was waiting for him. Looming beside a massive column, the Dark Lord of the Sith extended the red blade of his lightsaber and said, "I have you at last, young Skywalker."

Vader swept toward him. Luke cringed and nearly stumbled back into the stairwell. He had no intention of falling into S'yblł's clutches again. Keeping his eyes on Vader, he edged away from the stairwell but accidentally backed into a column.

Vader swung his blade at Luke's head. Luke ducked and the lightsaber flashed over him, striking the column. The impact made a loud crack, and as Luke leaped aside and looked back, he saw what appeared to be a fresh gouge across the column's face.

Luke knew that Vader was just an illusion created by the mind witch, but...*It seems so real!*

Out of the corner of his eye, Luke saw S'yblł emerge from the stairwell just as Vader advanced toward him again. Luke realized that there was only one way to resist.

I've got to stop and be calm.

Instead of staring at the illusion of Vader, he relaxed and stared through it.

Vader stopped in front of Luke, raised the lightsaber, and swung hard. The red blade appeared to pass directly through Luke's body, but it had absolutely no effect on him. Luke stood his ground as Vader swung again.

"Your illusions are frightening, S'yblł," Luke said as the image faded and vanished. "But the only way they can do real harm is if I give in to them."

"I've underestimated you," S'yblł said bitterly. "Now you force me to demonstrate that a mind witch's powers extend far beyond weaving illusions!" She clenched a bony fist at Luke. "I can wield physical objects!"

Ryder Windham

Luke heard a loud breaking noise to his left, and he looked up to see that two neighboring columns had suddenly broken in half and were swaying toward him, along with the massive lintel they had supported for ages. Luke sensed it was no illusion.

S'ybll said, "I hate to crush a source of mental energies which can feed and renew me, but your friends should arrive soon to replace you!"

Luke instinctively calculated the trajectory of the falling stones and jumped just before they came crashing down where he'd been standing. He moved faster than S'ybll could keep track of him, and jumped over and behind a fragment of a broken lintel. Dust and debris flew in all directions.

The cloud of dust was still settling when Luke heard a welcome voice call out from the jungle. "Luke? Luke! It's Han and Chewie! You around, kid? What was that crash we heard?"

"This way!" S'ybll replied. "Hurry! Please! Your friend's been hurt!"

Emerging from the rubble, Luke said, "Not as fatally as you think, S'ybll. You've weakened me, but not so much I couldn't dodge one falling rock."

The mind witch glared at him. "You dare taunt me? Perhaps you need a final demonstration of just how far a mind witch's ability to move physical objects can go!" She lifted her arms and gestured at the ruins.

A sound like rolling thunder rippled across the area, and then the ruins exploded. Heavy stones rained down, smashing all around Luke. He suddenly felt as if he were trying to escape a meteor shower, but he also saw an opportunity to use S'ybll's powers against her. He ran fast to dodge the debris, then turned and ran back toward S'ybll.

S'ybll sneered at him as he changed course. He saw her try to redirect a large stone through the air in his direction, and he also saw a column that was falling toward her.

The stones crashed into the ground. The noise was followed by an almost total silence.

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Luke stepped out from the rubble. A moment later, he saw Han and Chewbacca arrive at the edge of the ruins.

"Luke!" Han shouted. "Chewie, the droids, and I have been blasted worried! What happened here, kid?"

"I made someone very angry, Han." Luke gestured at one of the toppled columns. A pale, bony arm jutted out from underneath it. "A mind witch," Luke continued. "She meant to kill me and renew herself by draining you two of your mental energies. I gambled that if she got enraged enough, the effort would exhaust her own energies instead. And without anything to sustain her, she collapsed as she should have ages ago."

Han glanced at Chewbacca and said, "I've heard of mind witches. Always thought they were just a crazy myth."

Luke said, "I guess S'ybl was the last of her kind."

"Since she intended to leave us like she wound up herself, I sure hope so! Time we left this paradise, kid."

They left the ruins and made their way back through the jungle to the *Millennium Falcon*. Although the *Falcon's* navicomputer remained temperamental, they managed to get back to Hoth and rejoin their allies at Echo Base.

Three years had passed since the destruction of the Death Star at Yavin 4, but the days were numbered for the Rebellion's new secret headquarters. Not long after the *Falcon's* return to the ice planet, an Imperial probe droid arrived on Hoth and subsequently transmitted an image of the Rebel base's large power generator back to the Imperial fleet.

And then the Empire struck back.

Interlude

As Luke reflected on his encounter with the mind witch, he recalled that it hadn't been the first time he'd confronted an apparition of Darth Vader. Not long after he'd destroyed the Death Star, he'd been recovering from an ill-fated meditation exercise when he'd dreamed of a duel with Vader. Ben Kenobi had appeared in the dream too, and when Luke awakened, it was with the certainty that Vader had survived the Battle of Yavin. Later, after the Battle of Hoth, he had faced yet another phantom, in a cave while he'd trained with the Jedi Master Yoda on the swamp planet Dagobah.

Luke had also had very real confrontations with Darth Vader on Monastery and Circarpous V—but all those experiences paled compared with his duel with Vader at Bespin, in Cloud City's reactor shaft...

Chapter Ten

Darth Vader's lightsaber swept through Luke's wrist.

Luke screamed. His hand arced away from the suddenly cauterized stub at the end of his right arm, carrying his lightsaber with it. The lightsaber automatically deactivated, and the weapon fell with the severed hand, like inconsequential refuse, into the incredibly deep reactor shaft.

Luke was balanced on a metal beam that jutted out from a long gantry in the shaft. Vader stood looming at the gantry's outer edge, just above Luke's position. The reactor's high winds whipped hard at both men. Luke clutched his wounded arm to his chest and slumped down on the beam.

"There is no escape," Vader said as Luke struggled to move away from him, crawling backward on the beam. "Don't make me destroy you, Luke."

But Luke kept crawling. He felt dizzy and sick. His only goal was to put distance between himself and Vader.

The Sith Lord switched off his lightsaber. "You do not yet realize your importance," he continued. "You have only begun to discover your power. Join me and I will complete your training. With our combined strength, we can end this destructive conflict and bring *order* to the galaxy."

Ryder Windham

Luke reached the end of the beam and wrapped his arms around a sensor array. Below him, there was a ring of metal, and beyond that, nothing but the yawning shaft. He turned to face Vader. "I'll never join you!"

"If only you knew the power of the dark side," Vader said. He reached out to clutch the air with his black-gloved fist. "Obi-Wan never told you what happened to your father."

"He told me enough!" Luke lowered his feet to the metal ring. Wincing, he added, "He told me you killed him."

"No," Vader said, his fist still clenched. "I am your father."

Luke's eyes opened wide. *My father? But Ben told me...* "No," Luke whimpered. "No. That's not true! That's impossible!"

"Search your feelings," Vader said. "You know it to be true."

"No!" Luke shouted. "No!"

The wind picked up, and Vader's black cape rippled at his back. "Luke—you can destroy the Emperor. He has foreseen this. It is your destiny." He opened his left hand and held it out to Luke. "Join me, and together we can rule the galaxy as father and son."

His voice is so hypnotic, Luke thought, and he felt part of him falling under Vader's spell. But only part. He looked into the shaft that seemed to stretch down to forever.

"Come with me," Vader urged. "It is the only way."

Luke stared up at Vader and felt a certain calmness as he thought, *No. It's not the only way.*

He released his arms from the sensor array and fell, down, down into the reactor shaft. There was nothing to break his fall. As he tumbled through the air, he looked up, half expecting to see Vader leaping down after him. But all he saw of Vader was a rapidly receding black speck at the edge of the already distant gantry.

Interlude

Sitting in front of a computer console in his quarters on the New Hope, Luke extended the fingers of his right hand and flexed them. Few people would ever guess that the hand was a cybernetic prosthetic. The surgeon droid on the Rebel medical frigate had done a superb job of replicating his hand, right down to the fingerprints. And thanks to Ben Kenobi, who'd written a book that Luke discovered in Ben's home on Tatooine, Luke had been able to construct a new lightsaber. Following Ben's written instructions, Luke had modified his weapon with flashback waterseals so it wouldn't short-circuit if it made contact with water, as his first lightsaber had done when he was on Mimban.

As Luke recalled the encounter with Vader on Cloud City, he didn't feel angry about his father's actions. Darth Vader had been the Emperor's servant, and the dark side had consumed nearly every trace of goodness in him. But in the end, on the second Death Star, at the Battle of Endor, the goodness that remained in Luke's father won out over the dark side. Anakin Skywalker destroyed the Sith, and he died a Jedi.

Luke wished Leia could see it that way too.

Granted, he could understand her bitterness. Not only had Vader committed scores of atrocities, but some of his nefarious schemes had survived the death of Anakin Skywalker. Luke thought of Shira Brie, the Force-sensitive Imperial agent who had infiltrated the Rebel Alliance. Although the Rebels had been led to believe that Shira had been killed during a mission,

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Vader had had her shattered body rebuilt and transformed her into his protégée. Recently, Shira had reemerged as Lumiya, the self-proclaimed Dark Lady of the Sith. Her present whereabouts were unknown.

Luke returned his attention to the computer console. He was using the computer to search the holonet for any and all data about the Jedi Order. Unfortunately, most of the information he found was merely old Imperial propaganda. The Empire's leaders still claimed that the Jedi Knights who had served the Republic during the Clone Wars had been secretly plotting to overthrow the Republic and conquer the galaxy. Luke knew that the data was rubbish, and that it was the Emperor who had manipulated events to bring down the Jedi Order and fulfill his own ambitions.

Luke didn't expect to find any data about Obi-Wan Kenobi, Master Yoda, or Anakin Skywalker. He'd searched the HoloNet before and had only come up empty. However, this time he found something....

Chapter Eleven

Anakin Skywalker—Winner. Time: 15.42:655.

Luke could hardly believe his eyes. His father's name and the words beside it were represented in Aurebesh lettering, suspended in the air above the computer console's holocomm. He'd found the data in an article that had recently been posted by a journalist and former Podracer pilot named Clegg Holdfast. Although Podracing remained illegal throughout the galaxy, the destruction of the second Death Star had apparently emboldened Holdfast to write about the outlawed sport.

Holdfast's article was a history of the Boonta Eve Classic, a once-famous Podrace competition that had been held annually at the Mos Espa Arena on Tatooine for many years. The article provided a list of Boonta winners and other participants. According to the data, Anakin Skywalker's victory had occurred thirty-six years earlier.

Luke studied the article with amazement. After the conflicting accounts he'd heard from his uncle and aunt as well as Ben Kenobi, he'd begun to wonder whether his father had ever been on Tatooine at all. Now it appeared he had proof.

He navigated through the article and found a holographic image and schematics of Anakin Skywalker's Podracer, an open-cockpit repulsorlift chariot reined to two long engines.

Ryder Windham

Unfortunately, Holdfast had not provided any images of Anakin. Examining the schematics for Anakin's chariot, Luke thought, *That can't be right. A person couldn't fit in that contraption.*

And then it hit him. Although the chariot was too small for an adult human, it could fit a child. He recalled what Ben's spirit had told him on Dagobah, just before Luke left to confront Darth Vader at Endor. Ben had said that Anakin was already a great pilot when they'd first met. Luke had assumed he'd meant an adult starpilot.

Could Ben have meant...my father was a Podracer pilot?

From personal experience, Luke knew that Podracing was an incredibly dangerous sport. Shortly after the destruction of the first Death Star, circumstances had led him to climb into the cramped cockpit of a Podracer—it had previously belonged to a Dug—and compete in a Podrace on the planet Muunilinst. Even with Jedi reflexes and the Force as his ally, it had taken great effort for Luke to survive that day. Although he could imagine young Anakin fitting into a Podracer's cockpit, he couldn't think of any good reason why a child would have been allowed behind the controls.

Luke scanned through the data in Holdfast's article. According to Holdfast, the Mos Espa Arena had become a track for swoop bike races, and two veteran pilots of the Boonta were currently employed as mechanics.

Luke decided right then that he was overdue for a vacation.

"Master Luke!" C-3PO said as he entered the hangar in the *New Hope*. "I've been looking for you all over the ship."

"Looks like you found me."

Luke was standing beside a ladder that extended up to the cockpit of his X-wing starfighter. While a team of technicians lowered R2-D2 into the socket behind the X-wing's cockpit, C-3PO said, "Sir, it appears you are...going somewhere?"

"Very perceptive, Threepio."

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Planted in his socket, R2-D2 rotated his domed head and emitted a digital chirp.

“What?” C-3PO said with surprise. “You’re going to Tatooine?”

“That’s right,” Luke said. “There’s something I need to investigate there.”

“But, sir, I just received word from Princess Leia. She has requested your presence on Aridus.”

“Why?”

“A meeting with the Chubbitts. There are several Chubbitts who remember you well from your previous visit. The princess thinks your presence might—”

“Tell her I’m unavailable,” Luke said, pulling on his helmet.

“But, sir, I had the distinct impression that the princess hoped you would—”

“Just *tell* her, Threepio,” Luke said as he climbed up to the cockpit. “If anything really urgent comes up, she can contact me on the emergency frequency.”

“Emergency frequency?” C-3PO said. “Oh, dear. I can’t imagine what her response will be.” As Luke was lowering himself behind the X-wing’s controls, C-3PO added, “Wait!”

“What is it now?”

“Sir, may I ask the nature of your mission? In case the princess inquires?”

Because Leia had expressed no interest in learning more about the life of Anakin Skywalker, Luke knew that she would probably get upset or angry if she learned why he was going to Tatooine. “It’s personal,” he said. “But don’t worry. I shouldn’t be gone more than a couple of days.” He lowered the cockpit canopy.

“Don’t worry?” C-3PO shook his head. “Oh, dear, oh, dear.” He looked at R2-D2, whose domed head stuck up behind the cockpit. “Artoo-Detoo, you *know* how nervous I get when anyone tells me that. Promise me you’ll look after Master Luke.”

The astromech replied with a sputtering beep.

Ryder Windham

“What? Me? An old nanny droid?” As the X-wing lifted off and began moving out of the hangar, C-3PO replied with obvious outrage, “Well, *you*...you can go jump in a Sarlacc. See if I care!”

Chapter Twelve

I'm never coming back to this planet again.

Luke shook his head as he recalled the words he'd said to Ben Kenobi more than four years earlier, shortly before they'd blasted out of Mos Eisley Spaceport on the *Millennium Falcon*. Luke had returned several times to Tatooine since that day, and every time, he reminded himself, *Never say never*.

R2-D2 beeped from his socket. Luke glanced at the translation readout and replied, "Thanks for the offer, but I'll keep the controls on manual." Luke grinned. Sometimes he got the impression that the astromech enjoyed flying the X-wing as much as he did.

He landed his X-wing on the flat roof of the Mos Espa Grand Arena complex, a massive structure located several kilometers from Mos Espa Spaceport, at the junction of the Xelric Draw and the Northern Dune Sea. The complex consisted of several domed buildings and grandstands that overlooked a wide track. The grandstands had been built to accommodate more than 100,000 spectators, but now all the seats were empty.

"Stay with the ship, Artoo," Luke said as he climbed out of the cockpit, taking his dark robe with him. "I'm going to look around."

Ryder Windham

The astromech droid rattled in his socket behind the cockpit and beeped in protest.

"I didn't ask for your opinion," Luke said as he pulled on his robe and adjusted it to conceal the lightsaber at his belt. "I'm telling you to stay here. If any vandals come poking around the ship, you have my permission to zap 'em. All right?"

R2-D2 stopped rattling and responded with another series of beeps. To Luke's ears, it sounded as if the droid was actually happy about the possibility of using his retractable power-charge arm against thieves.

Luke walked alongside the roof's railed edge as he headed for a large domed structure that jutted up above roof level. He gazed out over the empty grandstands and studied the arena's wide, dilapidated speedway. To his right, the track curved off and vanished amid rocky pinnacles, and to his left, it curved back toward the immense plain known as Hutt Flats.

He heard a noise across the distance, the distinctive whine of swoop bikes, which were essentially long, powerful engines with seats on their backs. A moment later, he saw two swoop bikes zoom in from the Flats, carrying their riders past the grandstands before they sped under the broad expanse of an elevated footbridge that served as the finish line.

As the swoops came to a stop, Luke heard a woman's voice nearby. "Looking for something, mister?"

Luke turned to see a tall, slender woman standing outside a doorway to the domed building. She wore a strangely elegant jacket and dress, and from the way she held one hand behind her back, Luke assumed she was holding a weapon. "Hello," he said. "Yes, I'm hoping to find Ody Mandrell and Teemto Pagalies."

The woman looked at Luke suspiciously. "Who are you, and what do you want with them?"

Because Luke was an enemy of the Empire and cautious, he wasn't about to reveal his real name. "My name is Lars," he said. "A journalist named Clegg Holdfast wrote about this place, and I just wanted to talk with some of the old Podracer pilots."

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“Really?” the woman said. Looking past Luke, she asked, “Is that your droid and starfighter parked on my roof over there?”

Luke glanced over his shoulder and saw R2-D2 beside the X-wing. Then he looked back at the woman, who had moved her body slightly so he now saw the grip of a compact blaster pistol in her hand. He couldn’t blame her for being suspicious of strangers, but he also wanted to avoid a violent confrontation. He said, “May I ask your name?”

“Ulda,” she said. “And you’re trespassing on my property.”

“You *own* all this?”

“Keep your hands where I can see them,” Ulda said as she shifted her arm to level her pistol at Luke.

“Well, Ulda,” Luke said as raised his hands and looked straight into the woman’s eyes, “I don’t see a starfighter or a droid on the roof.”

Ulda looked past Luke again, then repeated, “I don’t see a starfighter or a droid on the roof.”

“I’m not going to harm you.”

“I’m not going to harm you,” the woman repeated as she placed the pistol into a jacket pocket.

“You can direct me to Ody Mandrell and Teemto Pagalies.”

“Yes, I can direct you to them,” Ulda said pleasantly. She was completely unaware that Luke was using the Force to gently manipulate her mind. She walked to the rail beside Luke and pointed down to the two swoop bikes that rested beyond the finish line. “There they are.”

“Do we remember Anakin Skywalker?” Teemto Pagalies said. Standing beside his swoop bike on the speedway in the shadow of the arena’s grandstand, he glanced at Ody Mandrell. “Ha! How could we forget him?”

Ody rolled his eyes as he aimed a thumb at Teemto and said to Luke, “I remember more than *this* guy about the race that Skywalker won.”

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Ody Mandrell, who stood slightly shorter than Luke, was an Er'Kit, a species characterized by pale gray skin and downward-pointed ears. Teemto was a Veknoid who was shorter than Ody and had a head that was mostly jaw. Teemto had also lost an eye, an arm, and both ears, and bore numerous scars—all mementos of his Podracing days.

Ody threw a friendly chuck at Teemto's shoulder and said, "Go on, tell us how well you remember *anything* after the Sand People blasted you at Canyon Dune Turn."

"But I also raced Skywalker *before* the Boonta!" Teemto said. "And I *didn't* forget that! Oh, and about the Boonta? I also remember *you* were disqualified because some pit droid got sucked into one of your engine intakes!"

"Sure, you remember," Ody laughed. "But only because I told you."

Teemto looked at Luke and said, "What do you wanna know about Skywalker?"

"Well," Luke said, "do you know how old he was when he won the race?"

The veteran Podracers answered at the same time. Ody said, "Nine." Teemto said, "Ten."

Luke smiled. "What was he like?"

Without hesitation, Teemto said, "A total demon."

"Demon?"

"Yeah, you know...a speed demon," Ody said. "It's a compliment."

Teemto said, "And that little human, he never cheated in a race."

"Ever!" Ody added. "Even when he had the chance! Most of us just did whatever we could to make it over the finish line. Say, did you ever see a Podrace?"

Luke thought of his own experience in a Podracer on Muunilinst and tried not to grin. He said, "I've seen a few, but...nothing like what you guys must have done. From what

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I've heard, I'm afraid most of the greatest Podraces happened before I was born."

Ody shook his head sadly. "Ain't that the lousy truth, brother."

"Hey!" Teemto said. "I just remembered: I have a vidrecording of the Boonta in the garage. You want a copy? Some great views of Skywalker's Podracer."

"Yes, please," Luke said. "I'd appreciate that very much."

"Be right back."

While Teemto hobbled off, Luke faced Ody and said, "Do you know if Anakin lived on Tatooine?"

Ody nodded. "Sure, right in Mos Espa Spaceport. I saw him a few times at Watto's junk shop. I got parts for my Podracer engine there." Ody scratched his head. "I think his mother worked at Watto's too. Gosh, that was a long time ago."

"Anakin's mother?" Luke said. "Was her name Shmi?"

Ody shook his head. "I can't recall. Like I said...a lot of years have passed. But if you want to find out more, you should go to Watto's and..." Ody clapped his hand against his forehead. "Sorry, I keep forgetting. It's not Watto's anymore. It's Wald's."

"Wald's?"

"Yeah, Watto retired. Now it's Wald's Parts. But that's why you should go there. Wald knew Anakin. Let me give you directions..."

Just as Ody finished telling Luke where to find the junk dealership, Teemto came walking back with a datatape. Handing it to Luke, he said, "Here ya go. A Boonta classic."

"Thank you," Luke said. "I'd like to pay you for this."

Teemto held up his one hand and said, "Keep your credits. Just tell all your friends to visit Mos Espa Arena for the swoop races."

"I'll do that," Luke said. "Thanks again." He bowed his head politely, then turned and walked off to return to his X-wing, eager to meet with Wald.

Chapter Thirteen

As Luke's X-wing carried him and R2-D2 away from the roof of the grand arena, Luke said, "Artoo, we're going to Mos Espa Spaceport. I need to visit a junk dealer in the southwest district."

R2-D2 responded with an inquisitive beep via the comm. Luke glanced at a rectangular monitor on the starfighter's control console to see small red letterforms appear, an Aurebesh translation of the droid's question.

Luke replied, "The junk dealer's name is Wald."

R2-D2 beeped again, and Luke read another question.

"Actually, someone named Watto used to own the place. Why are you so interested?"

The droid beeped yet again.

"But if you go with me, you'll just get sand in your joints."

R2-D2 protested so furiously that Luke didn't need to read the translation.

"All right, enough already!" Luke said. "Have it your way." Sometimes R2-D2 just baffled him.

Mos Espa Spaceport was a wide sprawl of mostly domed buildings made of pourstone. Luke landed the X-wing in an empty docking bay and helped R2-D2 out of the socket and down to the ground. They exited the docking bay and proceed to their next destination.

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Numerous human, alien, and droid pedestrians moved about the dusty streets of Mos Espa, and no one paid any notice to the robed stranger or his droid companion. Following the directions Ody Mandrell had given him, Luke found the junk shop without difficulty.

Wald's Parts was a bell-shaped domed building that was connected to an outdoor junkyard. R2-D2 followed Luke through the building's entrance portal, and they arrived in a chamber that was completely cluttered by metal scrap and odd bits of machinery from many different worlds. It reminded Luke of the tech dome on the Lars homestead, only much better stocked and far less organized. He thought, *When I was little, I would have loved this place!*

Luke heard footsteps and turned to see a Rodian enter the chamber from a back room. A green-skinned humanoid with large multifaceted eyes and a flexible snout, the Rodian saw Luke and said, "Help you?"

"Yes," Luke said. "My name is Lars. Are you Wald?"

"I am," the Rodian said. "Just like the sign says." He gestured to a sculptural sign that hung on the wall.

Luke hadn't noticed the sign because of all the scrap that surrounded it. The sign was composed of bent-metal Aurebesh letters that spelled out *Wald's Parts*, but Luke could tell from the rudimentary craftsmanship that some of the letters had been recycled from the shop's previous name.

Wald noticed the astromech droid beside Luke and said, "If you're interested in selling that droid, you came to the right place."

R2-D2 let out a panicked whistle and began beeping furiously.

"Calm down," Luke said to R2-D2. "*You're* the one who wanted to tag along." Looking at Wald, Luke said, "No, the droid's not for sale."

"Then how can I help you?"

"I'm trying to find out some information about a Podracer pilot named Anakin Skywalker. I just came from the Mos Espa

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Arena. Ody Mandrell and Teemto Pagalies, they told me that Anakin's mother used to work here, and that you knew him."

The Rodian snorted. "Ody and Teemto talk too much," he said. "But yeah, it's true. I knew Anakin. I was only six years old when he left Tatooine. Did Ody and Teemto tell you that I helped build Anakin's Podracer?"

"No, they didn't. When exactly did Anakin leave?"

"The same day he won," Wald said. The corners of his snout flexed into something that resembled a smile. "When he crossed that finish line, that may have been just about the proudest moment of my life."

"You were proud because you helped him build the winning Podracer?"

"He didn't just win the Boonta," Wald said. "He won his freedom."

"Oh?" Luke said. "In what way?"

"Watto, the Toydarian who used to own this place, he owned Anakin too."

"Sorry," Luke said. "Did you say *owned*?"

Wald nodded. "Anakin was Watto's slave."

Luke was stunned. He said, "Then...Anakin's mother? Shmi? She was a slave too?"

"That's right," Wald said. "And from the look on your face, I guess you didn't know that either."

Luke shook his head.

"You shouldn't be so stunned. There are lots of former slaves in Mos Espa, myself included."

Luke was silent for a moment, then he said, "I'm sorry. I had no idea."

Wald chuckled. "Nothing for you to be sorry about. It wasn't your fault. Anyway, things turned out pretty well for Anakin. He won his freedom and left the same day."

"Left?" Luke said. "With his mother?"

"No," Wald said. "You probably won't believe this, but he left with a Jedi. At least that's what another friend of ours, Kitster,

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told me. Ah, but a fellow as young as yourself, I doubt you even know about Jedi.”

Luke almost smiled at this. He said, “Actually, I have heard of them. Do you recall the Jedi’s name? The one who left with Anakin?”

“Can’t say I do,” Wald said. “He was a big human, broad face, had a beard.”

“Big? Do you mean he was tall?”

Wald chuckled again. “I was six years old at the time. Most adults looked like giants. But I remember seeing him step out of Anakin’s place, and this Jedi guy, he had to duck his head through the doorway. I thought, ‘That’s a big human.’ ”

Luke doubted that the Jedi had been Obi-Wan. He said, “So, did Anakin win his mother’s freedom too?”

“No, she was still a slave, but not for long.”

“The Jedi helped her?”

“Yeah,” Wald said. “Someone—probably Kitster, the friend I mentioned—told me that the Jedi sent a gift to Shmi, something she could use to buy her freedom. But she stayed with Watto for a few more years.”

Baffled, Luke said, “Why?”

Wald shrugged. “Maybe she had nowhere else to go. Also, Watto wasn’t all that bad.” Then Wald smiled. “She was a terrific lady. She gave me some of Anakin’s tools. If it weren’t for her, I might not have wound up working here and gaining my own freedom. But to make a long story short, she finally gained *her* freedom, and married Cliegg Lars, a moisture farmer. I went to their wedding in Anchorhead.” Wald narrowed his gaze on Luke’s features. “Say, didn’t you say your name was Lars? Maybe you’re related?”

“What?” Luke said. His memory flashed to the unmarked graves on the Lars homestead, and he wished he’d chosen a different name when he’d introduced himself to the Rodian. “Yes...but no. I mean, I’m Lars, but no relation. At least...I don’t think so.”

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“Yeah, well, I don’t see any resemblance.” Wald shook his head sadly and said, “It was awful, how Shmi died.”

Luke didn’t want to ask, but he had to know. “How?”

“Sand People abducted her from the Lars farm,” Wald said. “Took her off into the desert and killed her.”

The Rodian’s words jolted Luke. He could only imagine where Shmi’s death might have occurred, but he suddenly recalled the remote, abandoned Tusken Raider camp that he and Biggs had discovered in the Jundland Wastes years earlier. His legs felt weak. He placed one hand on top of R2-D2’s domed head to steady himself.

“I have to go,” Luke said. “Thank you...for your time.”

Wald said, “You all right?”

“Air,” Luke said absently. “I need some.” He turned and staggered out of the shop. R2-D2 followed.

The air outside was even hotter than in the shop, but Luke took a deep breath anyway. He had spent so many years wondering about the life of Anakin Skywalker and had been so excited when he’d discovered that his father had been a Podracer pilot on Tatooine. Now he just felt drained and exhausted.

My father and his mother were slaves. How awful for them.

And then he felt outraged. Not just because of the injustice of Anakin and Shmi’s circumstances, but because Owen and Beru had never told him. But then he wondered, *Did they even know that Shmi had been a slave before she married Owen’s father? Did Ben have any idea? He must have!* He glanced back at the junk shop, thought of more questions that he might have asked Wald, and then shook his head and looked away.

He realized he wasn’t angry with Owen, Beru, or Ben for that matter. He knew in his heart that there was a reason they had not told him the truth about so many things. They’d only been doing what they’d thought was best to protect him.

He reflected on how Owen used to get anxious to the point of fury when Luke strayed from home. *If I’d known how my grandmother died, I might have been more considerate.*

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R2-D2 rotated his dome to gaze at Luke through his photoreceptor. The droid emitted a somber-sounding, muffled beep.

Luke said, "C'mon, Artoo."

They returned to the docking bay. After Luke got R2-D2 back into the X-wing's astromech socket, he climbed into the starfighter's cockpit and saw a red light flashing on his comm. Someone was trying to contact him on the emergency frequency.

He pressed a button. A moment later, a man's familiar voice crackled from the comm. "Luke? Do you read me?"

"I read you, Han," Luke said, "but just barely. There's a lot of atmospheric interference." He was glad to be talking with his friend Han Solo, but given that they were communicating via the emergency frequency, he was also concerned about what Han might have to say.

"Goldenrod told—" Han's words were interrupted by a burst of static before his voice continued, "—on Tatooine."

Luke knew that "Goldenrod" was Han's nickname for C-3PO. Speaking to the droid behind him, Luke said, "Artoo, try to boost the signal."

R2-D2 beeped agreeably and extended an antenna from his dome.

Luke said, "Han, I'm still on Tatooine. What's wrong?"

Sounding slightly clearer, Han answered, "A possible situation on Tarnoonga."

"What happened?" Luke said. He knew that Tarnoonga was a water world in the Arkanis Sector, the same sector that contained the Tatooine system.

There was another burst of static; then Han's voice returned. "—lost contact with two Alliance scouts. In the last report from Tarnoonga, one of the scouts said they'd found what looked like an abandoned Imperial outpost before they were attacked by an Oskan blood eater."

Luke had never encountered any Oskan blood eaters, but knew from holovids that they were monstrous four-armed beasts

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with a taste for humans. Because the earliest recorded sighting of a blood eater was barely twenty-five years old, and because the creatures had since been discovered on the grounds of Imperial penal colonies on numerous worlds, it was rumored that they were artificially created life-forms developed by the Empire.

Luke said, "Were the scouts injured?"

"Incredibly, no," Han said, but quickly added, "At least we don't think so. According to the report, an unidentified woman killed the creature before it could harm anyone."

"Well, that's a relief," Luke said. "Sounds like we may have found a new ally."

"Let's hope so," Han said. "Before we lost contact, the scout said the woman use—"

More static.

"What?" Luke said. "What did the scout say about the woman?"

"A lightsaber, Luke!" Han said. "The woman used a lightsa—",

There was a loud static burst, and then the transmission went dead.

Chapter Fourteen

“Han? Han!” Still seated in his X-wing’s cockpit in the Mos Espa docking bay, Luke groaned in frustration with the broken connection.

In the socket behind the cockpit, R2-D2 beeped.

Luke looked at the rectangular monitor on his console to read the droid’s question, then replied, “Yes, it could be a trap, Artoo. But then again, there could also be two scouts who need our help.” As he lowered the cockpit canopy, he added, “I don’t have coordinates for Tarnoonga’s star system, but I know all the stars in the Arkanis Sector by sight. I’ll be able to spot it after we reach space, and you can plot a course from there.”

R2-D2 beeped again.

Luke read the droid’s response, then said, “What do you mean, you know the way to Tarnoonga? You’ve been there before?”

The astromech gave an affirmative whistle.

Luke grinned. “One of these days, you’ll have to tell me about your exploits before we met.” He started the X-wing’s engines. The starfighter lifted out of the docking bay, then ascended from the spaceport into space.

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Because he had only recently left a desert planet, Luke felt jolted by the sight of the ocean-covered Tarnoonga, which appeared to be in every way Tatooine's opposite. Gray skies hung over the dark, watery surface, and a lightning storm loomed on the horizon. The only visible land masses were the uppermost areas of otherwise submerged mountain ranges.

As the X-wing cut through the windy turbulence high over the roiling seas, Luke said, "Artoo, any luck contacting Han?"

The droid replied with a negative whistle.

Luke grimaced. He had hoped to reestablish communication with Han Solo after leaving Tatooine, but the only thing that came over the emergency frequency was static. Now the atmospheric conditions on Tarnoonga seemed to prohibit a clear transmission too.

A light pulsed on Luke's comm console. "It's a signal from an Alliance distress beacon, Artoo! At least we're receiving some kind of transmission clearly. Can you home in on it?"

The droid beeped, and then Luke saw a map appear on his console. On the map, a blue blip winked on and off to the east of the X-wing's position.

Luke turned his head to gaze out the cockpit's viewport and saw what appeared to be an island of jagged rock formations. It was the top of a mountain range that was approximately three kilometers long and almost half as wide. High black cliffs plummeted to the dark water below.

"It's coming from that range," Luke said. "Maybe the scouts landed their ship there. Let's see if we can spot it."

They flew over the mountain range's craggy terrain. It didn't take them long to find the ship. It was an old Corellian G9 Rigger freighter, resting on a wide black slab of rock that appeared to be partially protected from the winds by a natural outcropping. Luke couldn't see anything that looked like an abandoned Imperial outpost, which Han had mentioned when he'd relayed the missing scouts' report, or any other architectural

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structures. Luke allowed the possibility that the alleged outpost was camouflaged or underground.

R2-D2 helped guide the X-wing down beside the other ship. Although the freighter's hull had seen better days, it didn't appear to be damaged. Luke noticed that its landing ramp was down.

Still seated in the X-wing's cockpit, Luke checked his scopes. "No life signs on their ship, Artoo. And the beacon's signal is coming from somewhere else. You stay put while I check out the ship and look for the beacon. It can't be far. If I find anyone or see any blood eaters, I'll let you know."

As Luke unlocked the cockpit canopy, R2-D2 responded with a spurt of excited beeps.

Luke consulted the monitor to read the translation of the droid's message, then said, "No, I definitely *haven't* forgotten what Han said about a woman with a lightsaber."

The astromech emitted more excited beeps.

"No more arguments!" Luke said. "Your job is to stay here and keep trying to contact Han. I'll check in with you every fifteen minutes. If you don't hear back from me, take the X-wing into orbit and let the Alliance know where I am. Got that?"

The droid emitted a whimpering whistle.

"All right, then," Luke said. He checked his lightsaber and comlink, then climbed out of the cockpit, taking his robe with him. As he stepped down to the black rock, he noticed that his legs ached a bit because he'd been traveling in such a cramped cockpit. It was chilly outside. He pulled on his robe quickly, then walked cautiously toward the freighter.

Luke drew his lightsaber as he stepped up the freighter's landing ramp. He moved cautiously through the ship, searching for any sign of the scouts. Upon entering the bridge, he was alarmed to see the scorched remains of the controls and communication consoles. It looked like someone had fired a blaster at almost point-blank range into the instruments.

Luke had never heard of blood eaters using blasters. He wondered, *Did the scouts do this? Or someone else?*

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Exiting the freighter, he resecured his lightsaber to his belt. He walked away from the two ships, moving around the outcropping until he reached a gulley that led him up over the mountain's southern shoulder. Although fifteen minutes had yet to pass, he activated his comlink and said, "Do you read me, Artoo?"

R2-D2 beeped in response.

"I'm fine," Luke said. "Just testing the comlink." He returned the comlink to his belt before he moved on, heading for a notch between two stony ridges.

He kept his eyes peeled for anything unusual. The landscape was littered with broken black stones. Except for a few small patches of moss, there wasn't any sign of life. Luke wondered why Imperial soldiers might have brought an Oskan blood eater to Tarnoonga.

The clouds overhead became darker. Luke thought again about the report Han had relayed to him. *Could the scouts have really seen a Jedi? Or was it something else?* He realized that his heart was pounding unusually fast. He didn't stop walking but took a deep breath to calm himself.

He spied a small glint of silvery metal against the bleak terrain. He soon arrived at the thing that had caused the glint. It was a little box-shaped object, which rested on the ground between two stones. The object was slightly smaller than his comlink, and he recognized it as a compact emergency beacon.

He picked up the beacon and examined it. It didn't appear to be damaged. Because the transmitter would have been more effective if it had been placed in a more elevated position, he wondered if one of the scouts had accidentally dropped the device. *Maybe they didn't have time to think about where to put it.* He turned in place, scanning the surrounding area for any sign of movement. He saw none. He considered switching off the beacon but decided to leave it activated before he placed it in one of his robe's pockets.

And then he heard an inhuman roar behind him.

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Luke turned fast to see the blood eater running at him. The hulking beast was well over two and a half meters tall. Each of its four arms was tapered into a bladelike claw. Its hunched shoulders were topped by a gaping mouth with concentric layers of razor-sharp teeth instead of a head.

Luke did not pause to wonder where the creature had come from or how it had snuck up on him so fast without making a sound. His hand simply flashed to his lightsaber and he ignited its blade.

The blood eater's upper left and lower right arms lashed out at Luke. Luke ducked to avoid one arm as he brought his lightsaber up fast to deflect the other. The blood eater howled as Luke's blade cleaved through a thick layer of skin. Then it swung its other claw-tipped arms at Luke.

Luke jumped and rolled aside as the monster's claws smashed down into the ground. He sprang to his feet, bracing himself for another onslaught, but then he heard a sound behind him, the distinctive burst and hum of a just-activated lightsaber.

The blood eater stopped dead in its tracks. Luke froze.

And then Luke saw a blue-robed woman leap past him. A hood obscured her face, but, because she was wielding a lightsaber, Luke believed that she had to be the woman who reportedly had rescued the Alliance scouts.

Luke angled his own lightsaber away as the hooded woman swung her lightsaber at the blood eater. The blue energy blade swept through one clawed arm at the elbow. The blood eater yowled as its severed arm fell to the ground, and, at the same time, it reflexively swung one of its other claws out at its attacker.

Luke gasped as the blood eater's blow connected, sending the blue-robed woman flying into a wall of rock. The woman's lightsaber spiraled away through the air and automatically deactivated as the woman collapsed upon the rocky ground.

The blood eater howled with rage. Luke jumped forward, raising his lightsaber so that its tip was aimed straight at the monster's broad chest. The blood eater snatched up its severed

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claw as it backed away from Luke, then turned quickly and scurried away over the rocks.

Luke looked from the fleeing monster to the woman, who was now sprawled on the ground, lying facedown. She didn't move. Luke glanced back to where he had last seen the blood eater. The wounded monster had vanished. Then Luke looked at the area where he'd seen the woman's lightsaber fall, and he saw that it was gone too.

But where? Did the blood eater take it?

Luke deactivated his lightsaber and crouched down beside the motionless woman's prone form. He gently rolled her body over and discovered she was wearing the uniform of an Alliance scout, which Luke found puzzling.

The woman's face was still covered by her hood. She moaned. As Luke reached up to push her hood back, he said, "Are you all right?"

And then he saw her face. He recognized her immediately, even before she opened the ice blue eyes that he had not seen since he'd buried her on Hoth.

She was Frija.

Chapter Fifteen

Luke was stunned. “Frija?”

The woman’s eyes opened wide with surprise. “You...you’re Luke Skywalker.”

Her voice was just as he’d remembered it. He tore his gaze from her to scan the area again, searching and listening for the blood eater. He saw only masses of dark rock and the shadows between them. The creature seemed to be as stealthy as it was deadly.

Luke returned his attention to Frija and helped her up from the ground. He said, “How...how did you survive? And where did you get the lightsaber?”

“The lightsaber!” Frija said. Her hands flashed out to her sides. “Where is it? Oh, no, I lost it!”

“I think the blood eater got it,” Luke said. “But hang on, how did you survive after—”

“The lightsaber,” Frija interrupted, “it belonged to the Jedi who saved me and Levlonn, the scout who was with me. But another blood eater killed the Jedi and... it got Levlonn too. I only used the lightsaber because my blaster’s power cell died.”

The information was more than Luke could comprehend. “Wait. Let’s start with how you’re still alive. When I left you on—”

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"We can't stay here!" Frija said frantically. "There are at least five blood eaters in the area. They *will* come back. Where's your ship?"

"I landed next to yours," Luke said. "But mine's an X-wing. I'm afraid it won't hold both of—"

They heard a shuffling sound behind some nearby rocks. Frija grabbed Luke's wrist, tugged it sharply, and said, "Hurry!"

A low growl sounded from behind, and they ran in the opposite direction, heading away from the landing site. Luke sprinted alongside Frija as she held tight to his wrist, guiding him around a series of mammoth boulders.

Luke said, "Where're we going?"

"Someplace safe."

"We should go back to the ships!"

"We'd never make it!"

"How did the blood eaters get—"

"Stop talking! Just run!"

They didn't stop running until they arrived at a high wall of stone that was topped by a wide overhang. At the wall's base was a black slit, a crevice less than a meter wide.

"Inside!" Frija said breathlessly, tugging Luke after her as she moved into the narrow passage.

The crevice turned out to be the entrance to a cave. They arrived in a large smooth-walled chamber that was without windows and illuminated by a single glowlamp. The glowlamp was propped up against a wall beside several cargo containers. All the containers bore an Imperial insignia. A stairwell was carved into one wall, and the stone steps descended into darkness.

"This is the abandoned outpost?"

Frija nodded. "The blood eaters can't follow us in here. Are you all right?"

"Yes, but...I still don't understand." Luke looked at Frija cautiously. "How did you get here from Hoth?"

"Hoth?" Now it was Frija who looked confused. "What are you talking about?"

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“But, Frija, I—”

“And how do you know my name?” Frija interrupted. “We’ve never met before.”

Even more baffled, Luke said, “But I thought...you recognized me. After the blood eater fled, and I helped you up, you said my name.”

“Yes, but you’re...well, you’re *Luke Skywalker*,” Frija said. “Everyone in the Alliance knows what you look like. I’ve seen you on vidrecordings.”

“Vidrecordings?” Luke’s brow furrowed as he tried to make sense of it all. He suddenly realized that there was only one reasonable explanation for the woman who stood before him. “Your father. He was an Imperial governor?”

Frija looked at Luke warily, then said, “Yes, but that’s no secret. The Alliance is aware of who my father was.”

“Please, give me a moment.” Luke took a deep breath as he tried to collect his thoughts. “Your human replica droid. I met her. On Hoth, an ice planet in the Anoat Sector. She was with the replica of your father. She told me how the Empire had created them as decoys. You look like...I mean, the *droid* looked just like you.”

“Oh, my,” Frija said. “Is she...are the droids still...active?”

Luke shook his head. “They’re both gone. I buried them on Hoth.”

Frija sighed. “To my father, they were just part of his own elaborate escape plan,” she said sadly. “But I could never think of them as mere machines. They were too...too real. Especially my own counterpart. If any droid ever possessed genuine feelings, it was her.”

Luke had thought the same thing. He said, “What happened to your father?”

“He made the mistake of betraying the Emperor. He tried to deliver some secret plans to the Rebel Alliance. The Emperor had him killed.”

“I’m sorry.”

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"I joined the Alliance right after that. I knew it was the right thing to do. I wanted to make a difference."

Luke had previously wondered what had become of the droid Frija's human counterpart, whether she and her father had successfully escaped from the Rebels or the Imperials, or whatever they'd been running from. He had even consulted Alliance Intelligence to find out if they had any information about a renegade Imperial governor and his daughter. They hadn't been able to turn up anything useful. And yet here she was before him, just as kind and brave as the Frija he'd known on Hoth.

But he still had questions for her. "The lightsaber you used," he said. "Can you describe the person you took it from?"

Frija nodded. "A woman who wore a black cloak. I only glimpsed her face. She had fair skin. She appeared from out of nowhere, just a moment after the first blood eater attacked me and Levlonn." Frija bit her lower lip nervously.

"This woman," Luke said. "She actually identified herself as a Jedi?"

"She had a lightsaber. What else could she have been?"

"I don't know," Luke said, but he hoped she hadn't been a Sith disciple like Lumiya. "Go on."

"She told us to run for cover. Levlonn and I ran for our ship. I glanced back and saw the Jedi kill the blood eater. We immediately transmitted a report back to the *New Hope*. Is that how you found out about us?"

Luke nodded.

"We were still transmitting," Frija continued, "when we heard a scream from outside our ship. It was her. The Jedi. We searched for her body, but all we found was her weapon. I picked it up and..." Frija's eyes widened.

"What happened?"

"And then...and then they came. The other blood eaters...they came at us! We got back onto our ship, but two of

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them got inside. We exhausted our blasters on them. We...I..." Her entire body began to tremble. "I got away. Levlonn didn't."

Luke stepped closer to Frija. "I'm sorry about your partner," he said as he placed his hands on her shoulders. "You're safe now."

"Oh, Luke." She reached her arms around him and held him tight. "I'm so frightened."

The glowlamp was behind Frija, and, as Luke looked into its light, he suddenly had a feeling that he was overlooking some crucial detail. It wasn't that he doubted Frija, but he thought something was missing in her account of the lightsaber-wielding defender. Granted, he'd seen the lightsaber, but that was hardly evidence that the mysterious woman had been a Jedi.

He pulled back slightly, holding Frija at arm's length. "Listen," he said, "this might be important. You didn't actually see the blood eaters kill the Jedi?"

"No, I didn't."

"Do you think it's possible she's still alive?" Before Frija could answer, Luke's comlink emitted an electronic chirp. "Oh, no," Luke said. "I forgot all about Artoo!" He took his comlink from his belt and spoke into it. "Artoo, do you read me? Artoo?" Hearing no response, he shook the device, then repeated, "Do you read me?"

If R2-D2 gave an answer, Luke didn't hear it. Instead, he heard a loud roar echo down through the passage that had delivered them to the underground chamber.

"The blood eaters!" Frija said with alarm.

And then they heard a loud slam, like a massive hammer striking the chamber's outer wall. The noise was followed by another slam, and then another. Looking toward the passage, Luke returned the comlink to his belt as he said, "That sounds more like a krayt dragon."

"A what?"

"A creature from Tatooine," he said. "Whatever it is, it's big."

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The pounding noise continued and intensified. Frija said, "It's going to break through!" She turned and ran for the stairwell and plunged down the stone steps.

"Wait!" Luke said as Frija vanished into the darkness. He bent fast to pick up the glowlamp, but, as he angled its light into the stairwell and was about to follow Frija, he caught himself.

He tightened his grip on the glowlamp. He realized he had found the overlooked detail.

The hammering was now an almost deafening din. Luke ignored it and stepped over to one of the Imperial cargo containers. With his free hand, he threw back the container's lid. He swept the glowlamp over the container.

It was filled with stormtrooper armor.

He lifted the lid of another container. More white armor. And bones too. Human bones.

Luke released the lid. Suddenly, the thunderous pounding ended. Luke's ears were still ringing as he removed the comlink from his belt. Keeping his voice low, he activated the comlink and said, "Artoo, if you can hear me, leave now. Alert the Alliance to stay away from Tarnoonga. I'll try to find some other way to contact—"

"Luke!" Frija's voice carried up from the open stairwell. "Help me!"

It's a trap, Luke thought as he returned the comlink to his belt. *It was all a trap.*

He stepped away from the cargo containers. He glanced at the crevice that had served as his entrance to the chamber, but he knew he wouldn't get far if he tried to run. There was no way to hide from the thing in the chamber below.

He knew he had to confront it.

Taking the glowlamp with him, Luke followed Frija's path. The stone steps deposited him into a cave that was even darker than the upper room. The air was dank, and he could see pools of stagnant water on the uneven floor. Moving the glowlamp

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back and forth, he saw a row of ancient architectural columns that rose up to a high ceiling.

Off to his left, something made a dripping noise. Then there came a low growl, and Frija's voice whimpered, "Luke?"

Luke swung the glowlamp to his left and saw a blood eater. It had Frija pinned against one of the columns.

Luke said, "I know that monster isn't real."

"What?" Frija gasped. The blood eater dragged its claws closer against her body and shifted its maw directly over her head. "Luke, please!"

"And I know the Imperial outpost wasn't abandoned," Luke continued. "At least not before you got here."

"It's going to kill me!" Frija cringed as yellow saliva drooled from the blood eater's serrated teeth.

Keeping his voice calm, Luke said, "You made a mistake. You told me you used the lightsaber that you recovered because your blaster's power cell died. Why didn't you transfer the power cell from this glowlamp to your blaster?" He aimed the glowlamp's light directly into Frija's face. "That's what any Alliance scout would have done."

Frija glared at Luke.

"I know what you are," Luke said. "A mind witch."

The glowlamp flickered and went out, and then a wretched cackling echoed through the pitch-black cave. Luke had heard that laugh before.

It was S'ybl's.

Chapter Sixteen

Luke stood still as the hideous laughter ended. A moment later, the glowlamp flickered back on. The blood eater—or rather the illusion of it—was gone, and Frija had been replaced by S'ybll.

Standing in front of the ancient columns, S'ybll appeared as the same beautiful girl with long dark hair whom Luke recalled from the nameless jungle planet. Evidently, the Alliance scout uniform had also been an illusion, for she was now clad in the animal skins he also remembered.

“Expecting a *different* mind witch, Luke?”

He was stunned. “I saw your corpse...buried under a stone. I wasn't the only one. My friends saw you dead too.”

S'ybll lifted an eyebrow. “You, Han Solo, and the Wookiee...you saw what I wanted you to see. I was injured and severely weakened, that's all. Weak enough that you and your friends *could* have killed me. I had just enough strength to conjure the illusion of my death so I could slip away and lick my wounds. And wait for someone else to find me.”

Luke remembered the cargo containers upstairs. “The Imperials,” he said. “They must have gone looking for their missing shuttle, the one that you destroyed. But instead of killing the new arrivals...you tricked them. Maybe killed just one and

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then impersonated him so you could leave with the others. They brought you here. And then you killed them all.”

“It wasn’t a direct flight,” S’yblł said, “but your summary of events is remarkably accurate.” She smiled. “You’d make an excellent mind witch.”

The air suddenly became chilly. Luke said, “What do you want, S’yblł? Revenge? Is that it?”

S’yblł winced as if she found the idea distasteful. “No, not at all.” She took a single step away from the columns, and Luke took a cautious step backward. “Actually,” she continued, “I was thinking of something more along the lines of...an alliance.”

“An alliance! You can’t mean that we might...” Luke’s words caught in his throat. In all the excitement, he’d forgotten about—

“Yes,” S’yblł said as she read his mind. “The two Alliance scouts. After they arrived, I created an illusion of a female Jedi for them to see. I knew they’d report it, and that the report would lure you here.”

Luke scowled. “What have you done with them?”

“See for yourself.” She made a sweeping gesture with one hand, and the cave floor beneath Luke’s feet began to rumble and shift.

Luke stepped back onto firm ground and watched as a large rectangular section of duracrete flooring slid back into a hidden recess, revealing a deep, steep-walled pit. Shifting the glowlamp to his left hand, he saw two metal-barred cages in the pit. One cage contained two frightened-looking humans, a young woman and a man. He didn’t recognize either, but both wore Alliance scout uniforms. The other cage held a blood eater.

Staring down at the pit as if it were nothing more than an architectural curiosity, S’yblł said, “The pit was already here when I arrived. I think these caverns were once a hideout for a gang of pirates.”

The male scout turned his head in response to S’yblł’s voice and gazed up through the bars of the cage that held him and his fellow scout. “Look!” he said. “It’s Luke Skywalker!”

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The female scout said, "Thank the stars!"

Luke reached out with the Force. He sensed panic and confusion, and also that the pit and the life-forms in it were not illusions. He returned his gaze to S'ybll.

"Yes, the blood eater is quite real," she said, reading his mind. "The Imperials brought it here. Now it does my bidding."

"Release the scouts, S'ybll."

"As you wish."

From below, the blood eater let out a loud roar. Luke glanced down into the pit and saw that the cage that had held the scouts had vanished, leaving the two scouts standing out in the open. Across from them, the blood eater's claws began hammering at the bars of its own cage.

Directing his gaze to the terrified scouts, Luke said, "Stay calm. Don't move."

S'ybll pouted. "Did I do wrong? You don't want me to let the blood eater know that his cage is just an illusion too, do you?"

Luke moved closer to the edge of the pit, preparing to leap into it and defend the scouts if necessary. Glancing at S'ybll, he said, "Why are you doing this?"

"I told you," she said. "An alliance. Between us."

"For what purpose?"

"You want to defeat the Empire once and for all, don't you? With our combined powers, they wouldn't stand a chance."

Luke looked at her skeptically. "What about what *you* want?"

S'ybll placed her hands on her hips. "It takes a great deal of energy for me to maintain this form and generate illusions. I can't keep living this way, Luke. Waiting for people to find me. That's why I want...I *hope* you'll bring them to me."

"You want...people?"

"I'd be quite content with undesirable Imperials."

"Somehow I doubt that," Luke said. Shaking his head, he continued, "You're better at casting illusions than telling the truth. If it's people you wanted, you could have tricked the

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Imperials into flying you to a populated world instead of this one.”

S’yblł shrugged. “Just because I need people to survive doesn’t mean I like crowds.”

Luke thought, *She’s insane.*

S’yblł’s head snapped back as if she’d been slapped. “Insane? Do you really think so? That’s a shame, Luke Skywalker. Because if you don’t agree to join me, I...well, I just don’t know what I might do.”

“I’ll stand by my thoughts, S’yblł. I won’t allow anyone else to fall victim to you.”

“So be it.”

The blood eater roared again. Luke looked down into the pit to see that the second illusory cage had vanished. Luke did not hesitate. Still clutching the glowlamp in his left hand, he reached for his lightsaber with his right as he sprang forward and leaped down into the pit.

He landed between the blood eater and the two scouts, who fell back against the wall behind him. He cast the glowlamp aside, letting it clatter against the floor, and faced the hulking blood eater as he activated his lightsaber. But as his weapon hummed to life, he was surprised to hear the two scouts shout, “Behind you! Behind you!”

What surprised him was that their excited shouts sounded as if they came from in front of him.

And then the monster attacked.

Luke was knocked off his feet by a massive arm that struck him from behind. He held tight to his lightsaber as his body slammed into the pit’s wall and rebounded onto the floor. Recovering his wits as he rolled swiftly to his feet, he realized what had happened. He had been so intent on defending the scouts, he had neglected to consider one of the first lessons Ben Kenobi had taught him about the Force: that his eyes could deceive him. S’yblł had tricked him into mistaking the scouts for the blood eater.

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Luke squeezed his eyes closed, calmed his mind, and relaxed his muscles as he reached out with the Force.

He sensed the blood eater coming at him again. But this time, he dodged the claw that had been aimed at his head, and he swung his lightsaber's blade through the monster's arm.

The blood eater howled with pain and rage. Luke heard its wail but kept his eyes shut as he ducked the next incoming claw and swung his blade through one of the monster's legs. The monster howled again as it came crashing down on its wounded appendage. Luke had hoped the monster would surrender, but when he sensed another claw tearing through the air toward his chest, he knew it never would. Not before it tasted blood.

He jumped back to avoid the incoming claw, then kicked off the wall, launching himself over the monster's torso while swinging his lightsaber downward and through the thing's head. Eyes still closed, Luke landed near the two scouts.

The blood eater remained standing on its one leg for a moment, but it was already dead. A moment later, Luke heard the monster's body collapse to the pit floor.

Luke deactivated his lightsaber. Before he could address the scouts, S'ybl called down from above, "You killed my pet. Now I'll have to bury it."

Luke heard a rumbling sound and recognized it as the mechanism for closing the pit's ceiling. But a moment later, he heard an entirely different noise: a loud, explosive rush of water. He was compelled to open his eyes to confirm not only what he sensed through the Force but also what he felt rising up around his boots.

On the opposite wall of the pit, illuminated by the glowlamp that rested nearby, a concealed hatch had opened to release water into the pit. The water pounded against the blood eater's dismembered carcass, sending the body parts, along with the glowlamp, toward Luke and the scouts.

There was a loud slam from above as the pit's ceiling slid closed. Luke turned to face the astonished scouts, still visible by

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the soft light of the glowlamp. The water level was already up to their waists. As water continued to flood into the pit, the male scout said, "There's no way out!"

"You two stay close to me," Luke said. He kept his lightsaber deactivated but held it above the water with one hand as he used his other to shove one of the blood eater's floating claws aside. "The rising water will carry us up; then I'll cut a hole through the ceiling."

Glancing at Luke's lightsaber, the male scout said, "We're lucky you found us. I'm Andur Thorsim, by the way."

"And I'm Glaennor," said the female scout.

"Glad to know you," Luke said.

Glaennor said, "What's the story with S'ybl? I can't tell if she wants to kiss you or kill you."

"She's a mind witch," Luke said. "Your guess is as good as mine." He kept his lightsaber held high as he and the scouts began treading water. When the gap between the ceiling and the water's surface was just over a meter, he activated his blade and drove it up through the retractable duracrete ceiling. He made a broad circular cut and then pulled his arm back quickly as a thick, disc-shaped piece of duracrete fell into the water, leaving a wide hole overhead.

He deactivated his lightsaber. Casting a quick glance at the scouts, he said, "I'll go up first in case S'ybl's waiting for us, then you follow."

Luke was about to climb up through the hole when Glaennor said, "Something's moving in the water!"

"What?" Luke said. "Where?"

Before Glaennor could answer, a tentacle coiled around Luke's left ankle, and his entire body was yanked below the water's surface. He closed his mouth the moment he went under, but never had the chance to take a deep breath.

The bobbing glowlamp allowed him to see the large tentacled creature that had slipped in through the open hatch. All his senses told him that the creature wasn't an illusion. He didn't

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recognize the species; he merely knew that he had to free himself from it, and fast, before it yanked him out of the water-filled pit and into some narrow tunnel that lay beyond.

Twisting his body, Luke activated his waterproofed lightsaber and then angled it at the flexible appendage that was coiled around his leg. The lightsaber severed the tentacle, and the creature instantly released Luke before it retracted through the hatch, leaving a thin trail of black blood in its wake.

Luke deactivated his weapon and secured it to his belt as he turned and swam back toward the area where he'd left the scouts. He could see only one figure moving in the murky water, and realized that one scout must have escaped through the hole in the ceiling. He swam down and kicked off the pit's floor, launching himself up with so much force that he nearly hit his head on the duracrete ceiling when he broke the water's surface. The gap had closed to just a few centimeters.

Luke gasped for air as he faced Glaennor, who was still treading water. But then he looked up at the apparently solid ceiling and saw why she had not already exited.

"Andur made it through!" Glaennor said, her eyes wide with fear as she moved beside Luke. "But then the hole sealed itself!"

Luke closed his eyes and reached out with the Force. "It's just an illusion. The hole's over here." Eyes still shut, he reached up with one arm to catch hold of the hole's edges. When he opened his eyes, his arm appeared to be embedded in the ceiling. "C'mon!" he said. "This way! Give me your hand!"

But as he felt Glaennor's hand clamp around his wrist, he saw her suddenly transform into a withered crone with wet, filthy white hair that hung around her leering, skull-like face.

S'ybll!

Luke recoiled and thrashed in the water, trying to free himself from S'ybll's clutches. He knew that she would try to drain him of his life energy if she got her arms around him. But as she held tight and he felt no ill physical effect, he immediately realized that he had allowed his eyes to deceive him again.

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He closed his eyes, and the woman swimming beside him shouted, "What's wrong? Why'd you pull away?"

"Sorry, Glaennor!" he said, his eyes still shut as he reached up through the invisible hole in the ceiling again. "S'ybll made me think you were her."

"Oh," Glaennor said, tilting her head back to lift her chin above the water. "I hope she doesn't do that again."

"Let me handle her. Just hang on!"

Keeping his eyes closed and one hand on Glaennor, Luke hauled himself up through the hole, then pulled her up after him. They were both thoroughly drenched. Luke was doing his best to remain calm when Glaennor screamed, "Andur, look out! Another blood eater!"

And then Luke heard Andur shouting too. Speaking calmly, Luke said, "No. It's just another one of S'ybll's illusions. Just relax and close your eyes."

The two scouts obeyed. A silence fell throughout the cavern. It didn't last long.

"That's right, close your eyes," S'ybll said from a few meters away. Then she cackled and added, "I wouldn't want you to see what's coming."

Luke sensed something large moving fast toward him. It was a block of stone, traveling through the air from near the architectural columns. He threw himself down over Glaennor, shielding her body as the stone sailed over them. A moment later, the stone crashed upon the cavern floor.

Glaennor said, "That didn't sound like an illusion to me!"

"Stay put, and don't move," Luke said as he got up and stepped aside. He wanted to draw S'ybll's attention away from the scouts.

S'ybll taunted, "Going somewhere, Luke?"

He knew that opening his eyes would be risky, but he did it fast. He saw Andur, who leaned against a nearby wall with his hands held over his eyes, and also S'ybll, who stood before the

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old columns. Unlike the illusion of the crone he'd seen in the water-filled pit, she still looked young and beautiful.

S'ybll smiled and said, "Our reunion doesn't have to end in death and destruction. My offer of an alliance still stands."

"You never give up, do you?" Luke said. "If you can read my mind, you know that nothing could convince me to join you."

S'ybll arched one eyebrow. "Nothing?"

A light shimmered in the air near Luke, and then a ghostly apparition materialized. It was a man wearing the robes of a Jedi. Luke recognized him. It was his father, Anakin Skywalker.

"Luke," Anakin said. "I know you still have many questions about me."

Luke swallowed hard. He knew that the apparition wasn't really his father's spirit, but...*His voice is just as I remembered.*

"I've missed you, son."

Luke tore his eyes from the apparition to face S'ybll.

The apparition said, "Just as you found goodness in me, can you not find any in S'ybll?"

Luke kept his gaze fixed on S'ybll. "No," he said. "I can't. I sense only darkness in you."

S'ybll took a step back, moving closer to the columns.

Watching her, Luke wondered why she was staying so close to the ancient structure. *Does it make her feel protected?* And then the realization hit him. *It gives her power!*

Reading Luke's mind, S'ybll winced. She said, "You're wrong."

The illusion of Anakin Skywalker's spirit vanished.

Luke said, "These columns are identical to the ones at the ruins on the jungle world. What do they do exactly? Increase your psychic abilities?"

"My powers are my own!"

"You came here after you destroyed your old home because you needed a new one, and you knew about *this* place. Now you're afraid of losing power. You're afraid of leaving Tarnoonga."

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"I'm afraid of nothing!" S'ybll extended her arms toward Luke, and two more large stones launched away from the structure.

Luke dodged both stones with ease and they smashed into the wall behind him. Remembering how he'd defeated her before, he said, "Keep it up, S'ybll, and you'll find yourself homeless again."

Enraged, S'ybll lifted yet another large stone. Following her gaze, Luke saw she was aiming for Andur. He leaped over to Andur and yanked him aside. A split second later, the stone crashed against the wall where Andur had been standing. Luke shoved the startled scout against the ground and said, "Stay here."

S'ybll lifted two stones at once. Luke ran, weaving away from Andur and then turning to sprint straight for S'ybll. Without breaking his stride, he activated his lightsaber and dragged its blade through the nearest column, and then the next. The brittle columns shattered and collapsed.

S'ybll turned fast, trying to redirect the stones at Luke. She failed, lost control, and both stones crashed to the ground. Luke chopped through three more columns and then leaped away from the structure. He rolled and came up standing, turning just in time to see the broken columns fall.

The columns crashed down on top of S'ybll.

Or was it another illusion? Keeping his eyes on the rubble, Luke said, "Andur and Glaennor! Stay where you are! S'ybll might still be—"

Before he could finish, he was tackled from behind and felt a jolt travel through his nervous system. It was S'ybll. He hadn't sensed her coming. As her pale, bony arms locked around his torso, his own arms flung out away from his body, and his lightsaber fell from his grasp.

"Remember my touch, Luke?" S'ybll said, squeezing him tight. "When I'm done with you, I'll be more powerful than ever!"

Luke groaned.

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And then the cavern's ceiling exploded open. It was unexpected, taking Luke, S'ybll, and the two scouts by complete surprise. The power of the blast sent Luke and S'ybll tumbling across the floor. Stones rained down from above, leaving an immense gaping hole in the ceiling, exposing the sky above.

S'ybll gasped as Luke fell back on top of her, causing her to lose her grip on him. As he rolled away from her, he glanced up through the hole in the shattered ceiling and saw what had caused the explosion. It was his X-wing starfighter, which hovered above the newly formed hole. The X-wing's cockpit was empty, but the socket behind the cockpit was not.

Artoo?

And then, from his comlink, Luke heard R2-D2's excited beeps.

Luke realized that his comlink probably had been working all along, but that S'ybll had manipulated his mind so he couldn't hear it. He also realized that the astromech had disobeyed his command to leave Tarnoonga, assumed control of the X-wing, and homed in on his comlink to pinpoint his position. But before Luke could answer the plucky droid, S'ybll shifted on the floor beside him.

Luke spied his lightsaber lying near the rubble. Using the Force, he drew the weapon through the air, and it landed with a smack against the palm of his hand.

S'ybll shrieked behind him. Luke ignited his blade and turned quickly to defend himself.

He didn't realize that S'ybll was already lurching toward him. His lightsaber went straight through her chest. S'ybll's mouth fell open and she made a croaking noise.

Luke switched off his lightsaber.

Teetering on her spindly legs, S'ybll sneered at Luke and said, "I never did like you." Then the mind witch's eyes rolled up into her skull and she collapsed upon the cavern floor.

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Luke could hear his X-wing's engines through the hole in the ceiling. He kept his eyes locked on S'ybl's decrepit corpse as he reached for his comlink. "Artoo-Detoo, do you read me?"

The astromech responded with an affirmative beep.

"Land the X-wing and get down here," Luke said. "I need you to look at something for me."

Luke called out to the scouts to make sure they were both all right. He didn't take his eyes off S'ybl's dead body until R2-D2 entered the cavern and arrived by his side. Only after the astromech droid confirmed that he also saw the mind witch dead on the floor did Luke breathe a sigh of relief.

Chapter Seventeen

“S’ybl?” Han Solo said with disbelief. He looked at Chewbacca.

Chewbacca growled.

Returning his gaze to Luke, Han said, “The mind witch? But I thought she was dead.”

“Our mistake,” Luke said.

“*Our* mistake?” Han chuckled. “Speak for yourself, pal. Usually when I see some old hag’s arm sticking out from under a big block of stone, I just assume she’s not gonna get up and walk away.”

Chewbacca agreed with a robust chortle.

Turning serious, Han added, “You’re positive S’ybl’s dead? For real?”

Luke nodded. “Artoo saw her body. Psychic powers don’t work on droid photoreceptors.”

They were standing on the ground beside the *Millennium Falcon*, which had landed on the same wide slab of rock that supported the Alliance scouts’ old freighter and Luke’s X-wing on Tarnoonga. R2-D2 was inside the freighter, helping Glaennor and Andur repair their damaged controls. The storm clouds Luke had seen earlier had since passed, and the ocean that surrounded the mountaintop island was remarkably calm.

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“Sorry we didn’t get here sooner,” Han continued. “As soon as we lost contact with you, Chewie and I figured you might need a hand. We really stomped on it, got here as fast as we could.”

Just then, R2-D2 moved down the freighter’s landing ramp. Seeing the droid, Luke said, “Well, I *did* get a helping hand from a trigger-happy friend of ours. If Artoo hadn’t taken control of the X-wing and come looking for me, I can only imagine how things might have turned out.”

R2-D2 responded with a whooping series of beeps and whistles, and then Glaennor and Andur followed the astromech down the ramp. Looking at Luke, Glaennor said, “Our control console won’t win a beauty contest, but we’re almost good to go.”

Andur said, “General Solo, can you spare a power coupling?”

“No problem,” Han said. “Chewie?”

As Chewbacca left to help the scouts complete their repairs, R2-D2 came to a stop beside Luke and Han. Han said, “There’s something I’m wondering, Luke. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t wanna.”

“What is it?”

“Goldenrod told me you went to Tatooine. Said you were on some kind of personal business.”

Luke sighed. “Threepio talks too much.”

“You’re tellin’ me? I’ve been saying that for years.”

Suddenly, R2-D2 beeped with excitement. He wobbled slightly on his legs as a panel slid back on his dome to release an extendible antenna.

“What is it, Artoo?” Luke said. “You’re picking up a signal?”

R2-D2 beeped again, and then activated his built-in holoprojector. A moment later, he beamed a flickering hologram of Princess Leia onto the ground before Luke and Han.

“Luke!” Leia said. “Are you all right?” Her voice was broadcast via the astromech’s audio transmitter.

“I’m fine,” Luke said. He gestured to Han and added, “We’re all fine.”

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“Well, that’s a relief,” Leia replied. “But I wish you had told me you were leaving Aridus,”

“I’m sorry,” Luke said. “It’s just that...Leia, I found out some information about our father, and I wanted to investigate, so I—”

“So you risked your life?” Leia interrupted. She shook her head. “Did it ever occur to you that your...your *quest* for knowledge might just get you killed? Why are you so determined to find out more? Why can’t you just stop thinking about him?”

Keeping his voice calm, Luke said, “Because I’m not you, Leia. I’d rather try to have some understanding of who our father was than forget about him entirely.”

Stunned by Luke’s words, Leia’s hologram jerked slightly.

Han shifted uneasily on his feet. His eyes flicked from Leia’s hologram to Luke and then back to Leia again. Leia continued to hold Luke’s gaze.

“Please, Leia,” Luke continued. “Please just listen. I don’t want to upset you. I know you’d rather not talk about this at all, but...I’m not trying to convince you to forgive our father. I’m only hoping to figure out how he became the man he was and how certain circumstances of his life might have affected his decisions. I can’t learn from his mistakes if I don’t know what they were. Can we at least agree that we’re better prepared for the future if we know more about the past?”

Leia’s hologram was motionless and silent just long enough to make Luke wonder if something were wrong with the transmission, but then she nodded and said, “Yes, I can agree with that. But we have other concerns right now. If we talk more about...our father, we’ll talk when *I’m* ready. All right?”

Luke smiled at this. “Thank you, Leia.”

“The fleet will be leaving Aridus shortly,” Leia said. “We’ve located Moff Jarnek on Spirador, and we need to go over a plan to apprehend him. Artoo has the coordinates for our rendezvous. I’ll see you there.” She broke the connection and the hologram vanished.

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Luke looked at R2-D2 and said, “Get the X-wing ready for launch, Artoo.”

The astromech whistled and moved off, heading for the X-wing starfighter. As the droid left, Han stretched his arms, looked at Luke and said, “So, that ‘personal business’ on Tatooine? That was about your father?”

Luke nodded.

Han lifted his eyebrows. “Yeah? Which one? The Jedi or the Sith Lord?”

“Aw, give me a break, Han. If you’re just going to joke about—”

“Hey, hey, take it easy, Luke,” Han said, raising his hands. “I wasn’t needling you, just wondering who you’re talking about.”

“Oh,” Luke said. “Well, I was trying to find out about Anakin.”

Han nodded. “See, that’s all I was askin’. So...how’d it work out?”

Luke shrugged. “Not the way I expected.” He turned his gaze to the ocean. “I learned from a HoloNet search that Anakin was on Tatooine when he was a boy. From what I gathered afterward, at least a few people considered him to be a remarkable person and even thought well of him. But his life was also a lot more complicated than I ever imagined. There’s still so much I *don’t* know about him.” Still looking at the ocean, Luke said, “As much as I might ever learn about my father, I can’t even begin to put myself in his shoes. I don’t think I’ll ever really know who he was.”

“Yeah, that may be,” Han said as he looked out over the ocean too. “But the way I see things, knowing who your father was isn’t nearly as important as knowing who you are.”

Luke looked at Han. “Say that again?”

“Naw,” Han said. “You heard me the first time.”

Epilogue

Imperial Moff Harlov Jarnek didn't think anyone could touch him, especially after he used the Star Destroyers under his command to blockade the planet Spirador, where he had a private palace.

He was resting in a lounge chair in the palace, watching a holoovid, when he heard one of his servant droids walk into the room. Although Jarnek hadn't heard any alarms go off, he felt a sudden panic when he turned to look at the approaching droid.

The droid's chest had been equipped with concealed blasters to kill trespassers, but Jarnek could see clearly that the droid was no longer prepared to stop anyone, because its chest was gone, along with its head and arms. It looked as though some kind of industrial laser had cut the droid in half, just above the waist.

The droid's remains tripped and collapsed across the floor.

Jarnek couldn't imagine how anyone could have made it through the blockade and infiltrated his palace. He had stormtroopers as well as droids monitoring the entire building. He jumped out of his chair and was about to run for a blaster that he kept on a nearby table when a hooded man appeared in the same doorway through which the damaged droid had entered. The hooded man said, "You're under arrest, Moff Jarnek."

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Glaring at the intruder, Jarnek bellowed, “Who do you think you are?”

“I’m Luke Skywalker,” Luke said as he pulled back his hood. “I’m a Jedi.”

STAR WARS®
THE WRATH OF
DARTH MAUL

BY RYDER WINDHAM



**For Allan Kausch, who introduced
me to Darth Maul**

Prologue

The prong-nosed rat knew that the dark heap lying in the tunnel was a dead man. He could tell by the incredible stench. Unable to detect any other predators in the tunnel, the rat's sharp nose twitched with excitement at his discovery, a large and easy meal, all for him.

The rat edged along the side of the tunnel, stepping over the skeletons of other creatures—many small skeletons, but others quite large—as it moved toward the corpse. Ragged scraps of broad, waterproof fabric were piled over the lower half of the dead man's body. His head, arms, and chest were exposed. A fine layer of dust covered his skin, barely concealing the bold, jagged tattoos that adorned his remains. His head rested at an odd angle against the ground because of the long, sharp horns that jutted from his skull. The rat slunk closer to the body and opened his jaws.

The rat never saw the fist that crashed down on the back of his neck. And then the man, who was very much alive, opened his yellow eyes as he rolled over and lashed out with his other hand to seize his prey. He kicked away the fabric scraps he'd been using as blankets, revealing the mechanical apparatus that formed his lower body.

The apparatus was affixed to the man's midriff, just below his rib cage, and consisted of a droid carriage equipped with six metal legs. The legs were unevenly jointed, cannibalized from the parts of ruined droids, each leg ending with a tapered point. As the prong-nosed rat writhed in his clutches, the man

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skittered out from under the blankets like a monstrous robotic spider, his metal legs clacking against the tunnel floor.

He had no recollection of how he'd lost his lower body or who had grafted his torso to the droid carriage. Although he knew the tunnels that had become his domain, he did not know that he was on a planet named Lotho Minor. Nor did he remember his own name. And for the moment he didn't care. His mind was on only one thing.

Food.

He tore into the rat and began eating it greedily. A few minutes later, as he licked the last of the gore from his lips, a familiar feeling returned to him. It was the only feeling he had, the only emotion he knew when he wasn't delirious with hunger. Hatred. Not just anger and rage, but pure and total hatred.

He hated his circumstances. Hated the tunnels and all the vermin that ventured into them. Hated being hungry, and being unable to rest without some other creature trying to take a bite out of him. Hated that he knew all those distractions were meaningless. The primary object of his hatred was something far more significant, something he despised with such incredible intensity that he...

Can't remember.

Hated his bad memory too.

How had he arrived at this place? How long had he been living like a wild animal? His yellow eyes darted back and forth, sweeping the tunnel as if he might find a helpful answer in the shadowy nooks, amidst the gnawed bones of small creatures that littered the ground.

Nothing.

He grimaced. He wanted to remember. He wanted to know.

The frustration was like a painful itch that he knew he could never ever scratch. He lowered one hand to his side, and his fingertips brushed against one of his cold metal legs.

Wasn't always...like this.

He knew that he wasn't a man anymore, that he hadn't been one for years. He was just a creature in a filthy tunnel. And then he remembered the object of his hatred.

A man...the man who left me for dead.

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The hatred surged through his veins, filling him with the urge to kill anything within reach. He surveyed the skeletons and rotting carcasses on the tunnel's floor, then used his droid legs to launch several swift and vicious kicks that sent bones crashing against the walls. Finding a large rib cage, he seized it and brought it down hard across the back of one metal leg, then threw aside the splintered bones. He found no satisfaction in this petty destruction. He only hated more.

Why can't I remember?!

Balling his hands into tight fists, he felt his sharp, dirty fingernails dig into the bases of his leathery palms. He gnashed his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut as he struggled to conjure up a memory, any memory, that would help him recall his own identity.

It was then, while he felt his hatred burning within, that a spark ignited in his mind. And he saw a sea of fire....

Chapter One

The boy named Maul had to stand on his tiptoes to peer through the thick window in his small room. The window was polarized to block heat and light, but the view was still so intense that it made the boy squint. The light did not come from the sky, which was choked with black, smoky clouds, but radiated from the river of lava that flowed below the facility where Maul lived. Turning his head slightly, he saw the lava empty into what looked like a wide, fiery sea.

The planet's name was Mustafar, according to the droid that looked after Maul. The droid also served as the boy's teacher and had shown him holograms that illustrated Mustafar's terrain and the planet's location in the galaxy. The droid had shown him holograms of other worlds too. Maul had a hard time understanding that the holograms represented actual planets, but he had to memorize their names and correctly indicate their locations or the droid would subject him to a painful shock.

Fortunately, Maul was alone. Looking through the window, he tried to spot any signs of life. Occasionally, he would glimpse Mustafar's armored natives riding lava fleas in the distance, heading for the northern region where they worked as miners. A few times, he had even seen ore haulers traveling across the sky.

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At the moment, he could not see any Mustafarians or vessels, just the never-ending flow of lava, fire, smoke, and clouds.

The droid had told Maul that he wouldn't last long on Mustafar's surface, but that didn't stop him from wanting to venture outside. After all, if the Mustafarians could move about freely, why couldn't he? He might need Mustafarian armor to protect him from the heat, and also some kind of breathing apparatus. He wondered how difficult it would be to acquire such things. He had no reason to believe a Mustafarian would just give him what he needed to survive. But he did imagine that going outside would be exciting.

Maul moved slightly and saw something shift across the window's surface. Maul realized it was his own reflection. He could see only the top of his head, which had multiple small horns. Like the rest of his body, his head was distinguished by red and black patterns. His eyes were bright yellow with small black pupils.

The first time he had seen his reflection, he had been startled, because he had thought he was seeing another person. For all he knew, his reflection *was* another person, another boy who looked like him and echoed his every movement. A boy who was semitransparent, suspended in the smoky air outside the room. A boy who was free to roam the planet's volcanic surface without fear of injury, who could leave Mustafar and go anywhere he wanted. A boy who could help Maul escape.

Maul wished he were that boy.

Bracing his hands against the seamless area where the smooth metal wall met the glass, Maul jumped up so he could see more of his thin body reflected in the window. He jumped again and again, fascinated by his leaping reflection as well as the sound of his bare feet smacking against the metal floor. He pushed himself away from the window as he jumped back, still facing the window, and continued jumping for several minutes. He didn't stop until well after his breathing had become short, his feet had gotten sore, and his leg muscles had begun stinging with pain.

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Catching his breath, he turned away from the window and surveyed his room. The room's only remarkable features were a single door against the wall opposite the window and a cold-water faucet that was operated by a palm sensor, positioned over a small drainage hole in one corner. The door was made of thick metal, the same material as the walls, floor, and ceiling. The bottom of the door had a narrow horizontal slot, through which the droid would sometimes shove a small tray of food, usually bits of uncooked meat. Maul could not see through the slot, because it remained sealed when not in use, by a sliding sheet of metal. Above the door was a convex blister that housed an audio speaker and also a photo-receptor, which allowed the droid to watch Maul at all times. There weren't any controls to open the door from inside Maul's room, at least none that Maul had ever been able to find.

A chime sounded from the speaker, alerting Maul to begin his exercises. Even though his room was not very large and his legs were still tired from jumping, he knew better than to ignore the chime. He immediately began running in place.

At first, Maul kept his arms tucked by his sides. Then he started pumping his arms up and down to match the steady rhythm of his leg muscles. He wanted to close his eyes and pretend that he was somewhere else, perhaps a larger room, but he was not allowed to close his eyes while exercising. He forced his eyelids to stay open and pumped his legs faster.

The chime sounded again. Maul stopped running, fell back against the floor, and began doing a series of sit-ups and leg lifts. After several minutes, the chime sounded, and Maul rolled over to do his push-up exercises, alternating between one- and two-handed push-ups. Several more minutes passed before the chime sounded again, signaling the exercise session's end. Maul collapsed against the cold floor.

Someone's coming.

Maul pushed himself up and stared hard at the door. Although he could not hear approaching footsteps, he knew the

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door would open in a moment, and a visitor would be standing in the chamber outside. He didn't know how he knew this. He just knew.

Maul could imagine only two possible visitors. One was the droid that looked after him. The other was the Man, who rarely visited. The Man wore a dark robe with a deep hood that left most of his features in shadow. Maul had never actually seen the Man's eyes.

Maul hated the Man even more than he hated the droid. The Man frightened him.

The door made a hissing sound as it slid up and vanished into a slot in the ceiling. Standing outside the doorway was the droid. Made of shiny black metal, the droid had a bulbous head with five red mechanical eyes called photoreceptors and a mesh-grille vocabulator for speaking, and a cylindrical torso that held four long, jointed pincers for arms. The torso rested on a swivel-hinged abdomen that had six spiderlike legs.

Maul never knew what to expect from the droid. Sometimes it brought food or medicine or sprayed Maul with antiseptic cleansers or escorted him to a larger adjoining chamber where it would chase him or let him run in circles. Other times, it would talk to him and teach him words.

Usually, the droid brought pain.

Once, the droid had delivered a bright green and yellow snake that wasted no time in attacking Maul, sinking its venomous fangs deep into the boy's arm. Maul screamed and then threw his own body down on top of the snake's to crush it. As ravenous as he was enraged, Maul had not been able to resist taking several large bites of the dead snake, which had been more than his small stomach could handle. After that incident, the droid had returned with medicine, bandages, and a stomach pump.

Now, standing before Maul in the doorway, the droid slowly extended one pincer away from its body and swiveled the tip in a broad circular movement. Maul kept his eyes focused on the rotating pincer as he felt his muscles tense, bracing himself to

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leap away from it. He didn't notice the small panel that opened below one of the droid's eyes. The opened panel exposed a socket that housed a telescopic arm tipped with a hypodermic needle. The arm lashed out, jabbed the needle into Maul's right shoulder, and then rapidly retracted into the droid's head. The droid had taken just a fraction of a second to make the injection—so little time that Maul barely comprehended that the needle had pierced his skin.

Maul blinked as he reached up and rubbed his shoulder. He realized that the droid had done something to him and had rotated its pincer only to distract him. And then he felt a strange, warm sensation spreading throughout his body. He frowned at the droid, and then his eyelids drooped and his legs buckled. The droid's arms extended, catching the boy before he could hit the floor.

The spider-legged droid picked up the unconscious boy and carried him out of the little room without any difficulty. The boy was not at all heavy. He was barely three years old.

When Maul awoke, he was lying on a metal bench in a large high-ceilinged chamber that he had never visited before. Three tall, narrow windows were set into one wall, illuminating the floor in front of Maul but leaving most of the chamber in darkness. Through the windows, he saw molten rock cascading past a black jagged cliff.

Maul did not remember falling asleep or leaving his own room. He suspected he was about to be disciplined. He wondered if he hadn't done all his exercises correctly or if he had made some other mistake. Not that it mattered. Sometimes he was disciplined without any explanation at all. He had been learning discipline since he had learned how to walk. One of the first things he learned was not to cry. Crying never made anything better. Crying only made things worse.

Maul slowly pushed himself up from the bench. He felt cool air against his back and suspected there was a vent or a doorway

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behind him. Looking around the chamber, he noticed five red lights glowing in the darkness of one nearby corner. He recognized the lights as the eyes of the spider-legged droid.

Maul rubbed his right shoulder. He remembered that the droid had struck him in the shoulder earlier, and suspected that the droid had made him fall asleep. He wondered what the droid might do next. Would it kill him?

The droid lurched out of the corner. Maul hit the floor with his bare feet, and began running as fast as his small legs could carry him away from the droid. Staying out of the light that stretched from the windows across the floor, he darted toward an inner wall, heading for the source of the draft he'd felt against his back. His vision adjusted to the darkness and he found a quadrangular doorway. He did not hesitate to run through it, even though he had no idea of what awaited him in the next chamber.

Darkness. A chamber without windows. Then he glimpsed a dim sliver of light ahead. Ignoring the droid's clattering footsteps behind him, he ran toward the light, which emanated from somewhere beyond a curved wall. He knew he couldn't outrun the droid, but he didn't dare stop.

Maul ran around the curved wall and entered a long, narrow corridor. Illuminated by small rectangular lamps embedded in the walls, the corridor was so long that he couldn't see the other end. Maul kept running. He heard the droid's footsteps pause at the corridor's entrance. He hoped the droid was too large to follow him into the corridor.

Risking a backward glance, he saw the droid had already tilted its body sideways so four of its legs tapped against the wall while the remaining two continued to scramble up the floor, propelling its metal body after Maul. Maul gasped as he turned his gaze forward, never breaking his stride.

He heard the droid's footsteps grow louder and knew it was gaining on him. He somehow sensed the droid was about to snare him with a pincer. Desperate and determined to evade the

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droid, Maul jumped to the side, planting one foot against the wall to his right, then sprang to the opposite wall, keeping his feet moving so that he traveled two steps across the vertical surface in a diagonal descent to the floor. Maul heard the pincer slam into the floor behind him, and he jumped up to make two more quick strides along the right wall before he flung himself back to the floor, still running forward. As he ran, he heard a loud and satisfying crash from behind, and he knew that the droid had tripped over its own legs in its failed effort to keep up with him.

Suspecting that the droid would not only recover but also be very angry with him, Maul ran faster. His heart was pounding as he saw that the corridor terminated at another quadrangular doorway. He exited the corridor fast and arrived in a chamber that was unlike any place he had ever imagined.

Broad tapestries hung from the walls, which were also decorated with strange sculptures. Carved furniture, made from strangely jointed and highly polished bones, rested on a wide rug that had once been an animal's hide. At the chamber's center, an enormous orb of transparent greenish blue liquid, nearly two meters in diameter, was suspended in the air above a circular dining table. Dozens of small, multicolored aquatic creatures swam within the orb, some so close to the surface that their swishing tails sent ripples around the orb's circumference.

Maul was so amazed by all the wondrous things in the room that he almost forgot that he had stopped running. He just stood there, looking from the swimming creatures to the decorations. But as he studied the carved furniture, he instinctively realized the chamber was a special place. It was a place where someone sat and looked at all the things in the room. It was a place where someone lived. He knew the droid did not require such luxuries. He was certain that this place was the Man's lair.

"Welcome, Maul," rasped a low voice from behind Maul. "I have been expecting you."

Maul froze at the sound of the Man's voice. He locked his eyes on the floating orb. He wished he could become invisible.

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"I *had* expected that the droid would lead you here," the unseen Man continued. "The way you ran along the walls to evade the droid was *most* impressive. But then you always have been a clever boy."

Maul had heard the Man talk like this before. Compliments were almost always followed by punishments. Maul braced himself as he kept his eyes fixed on the floating orb. As unnerved as he was by the Man's presence, he was more fascinated by the aquatic creatures inside the orb. He wondered if the creatures were edible.

A screech of metal sounded from the doorway that Maul had just entered, and the droid pushed its body out of the narrow corridor to emerge inside the chamber. After the droid righted itself so that all its legs touched the floor, it moved up beside Maul, stopping short of the animal-hide rug. Maul shifted his gaze from the floating orb to the droid and noticed two of its legs were now bent at odd angles. The droid swiveled its mechanical eyes to stare at Maul and said in a droning tone, "You should not have run away."

"Leave us," the Man snapped at the droid.

The droid tottered away from Maul, moving toward a wide doorway on the other side of the room. Maul wanted to leave with the droid, but instead he looked at the floating orb and remained where he stood.

"You may face me," the Man said soothingly.

More than ever, Maul wished he were the free-floating boy who appeared to exist beyond the window in his own room. He tried very hard not to tremble as he slowly turned and looked up to face the Man.

As usual, the Man was wearing his dark robe with the deep hood, but he had pushed the hood back so it was draped behind his head. Maul was surprised to see his exposed face. The Man had blue eyes, fair skin of a singular color, and a head of wavy hair. Maul was also taken aback by how different the Man's head was from his own. The Man didn't even have horns.

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The Man lifted his eyebrows as he looked at Maul skeptically. "You can talk, can't you?"

Maul nodded.

"Yes?"

"Yes," Maul replied.

"You will address me as Master Sidious."

"Yes, Master Sidious."

Sidious smiled. "Excellent." He stepped past the boy and stopped beside the floating orb. Maul noticed that all the aquatic creatures within the orb swam to the far side, putting distance between themselves and Sidious. Sidious glanced at the creatures as if he found them only mildly interesting. "Maul, I have something important to tell you. I want you to listen carefully."

Maul listened.

Speaking slowly, Sidious said, "You...are...remarkable." Looking away from the watery orb, he faced Maul and added, "Very remarkable."

Maul did not know why he might be considered remarkable, or how Sidious expected him to respond. He decided to remain silent.

"Our galaxy is home to trillions of life-forms. Some are large, others small. But as diverse as they are, the truth is that most life-forms are just like these fish." Sidious gestured at the fish with a dismissive wave, and the fish appeared to shiver within the orb. "They seldom stray far from where they were born. They spend their time worrying about their next meal, about how they might avoid pain, and how long they might live. They live in fear of one another. And then, they die. It does not matter if they are an insect, a fish, a man, or...a snake."

Once again, Maul thought of the snake he had been forced to kill.

"You have already traveled great distances," Sidious continued. "You may have been born on the planet Iridonia, but you came to my attention on another world, Dathomir. There, the females rule and enslave the males. You were just an infant,

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and yet the most powerful beings on Dathomir were afraid of you. They wanted you dead because you were different.” Sidious smiled. “Do you know what makes you so remarkable, Maul? So different from ordinary life-forms?”

Maul shook his head and answered meekly, “No.”

Sidious raised his eyebrows slightly and pursed his lips. Shaking his head, he said, “That is not the correct response. The correct response is ‘No, Master Sidious.’”

Maul swallowed hard, then said, “No, Master Sidious.”

Sidious smiled again. “You are different because you are stronger. You have powers. You know things in advance. You look at the closed door to your room, and you know it is about to open. You have fast reflexes. Others only dream of anticipating moments as you do, or being able to move so fast. In this way, you and I are alike, Maul, except that my powers are much greater. My powers are greater because I know many things that you have yet to learn, such as how to make your powers work for you. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Master Sidious.”

“Good. Good.” Sidious walked around the watery orb until it was positioned between him and Maul. From Maul’s point of view, the orb distorted Sidious’s head and upper body. Sidious said, “I know you imagine a different life for yourself, Maul. An easier life than you have now.”

Maul remained silent.

“I know you’re upset about the snake that bit you,” Sidious said, continuing around the watery orb until he had a clear view of Maul. “I know everything about you, Maul. Everything.” Sidious edged around the orb until he was facing Maul again. “While you might think that your life is harsh and unpleasant, and that I am sometimes cruel, there is a reason for you to endure such pain. The reason is that you must become strong in every way. You must learn to overcome pain. Someday, you might become stronger than I. You’d like that, wouldn’t you? To be stronger than I?”

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“Yes, Master Sidious.”

Sidious beamed at the boy. “Good.” He glanced at the watery orb. “Ah! Look there, at those two fish.”

Maul followed Sidious’s gaze and saw a small fish with red and black stripes hovering beside a larger dark gray fish that had moved away from the other creatures to the bottom of the orb. Maul replied, “Yes, Master Sidious.” He noticed that the smaller fish had yellow eyes, the same color as his own. The small fish stared back at Maul.

“How amusing,” Sidious said. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say those two were pretending to be *us*. If they were, I wonder where that would leave the rest.”

Maul looked at the fish in the orb’s upper area and saw them begin to jerk and spasm. Several fish puffed up twice their original size, shuddered violently, and suddenly deflated. Others rolled erratically through the water, their eyes bulging as their gills pumped furiously. But after a few seconds, all the fish except for the two at the bottom stopped swimming entirely and began drifting off in different directions. Some floated toward the top of the orb, but most sank down beside the two surviving fish, who continued to hover next to each other. As the fish sank, Sidious recited a strange verse.

*‘Far above, far above,
We don’t know where we’ll fall.
Far above, far above,
What once was great is rendered small.’*

Maul wondered what the words meant. He knew Sidious had somehow selected the two fish and maneuvered them to the bottom of the orb and caused all the others to die. He didn’t know how Sidious had done this, but suspected it was some kind of magic. Looking away from the dead fish, Maul faced Sidious

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and said hesitantly, “Master Sidious...is it possible...to learn this power?”

Sidious smiled broadly, showing his teeth. “It is possible. But not immediately. You must be patient. I’ve prepared a training room. And today, you will receive personal instruction...from me.”

Maul was surprised to hear about a training room and was instantly curious to see it. He hoped it was larger than the training area outside his own small room. As he wondered how soon his Master would show him the new training room, the six-legged droid, its two damaged legs replaced by a shiny new pair, sauntered back into the chamber.

Sidious glanced at the droid, then looked back at Maul and said, “Legs are not easily replaced. You do realize you must be punished, do you not?”

“Yes, Master Sidious.”

“Always remember...a punishment is a lesson, young Maul. Learn it well. Now, come along.” As Sidious stepped away from the floating orb, he waved his fingers at a tapestry that hung against one wall. The tapestry slid silently up toward the ceiling and revealed an open doorway built into the wall. Sidious walked to the doorway, which Maul assumed was a passage that led to the new training room.

Maul tried to step away from the orb, but his legs suddenly felt like they were heavy weights, anchored to the floor. He knew he would be punished even more severely if he did not obey his Master, but it seemed his own body—independent of his mind—was refusing to move. But before Sidious noticed Maul’s hesitation, the droid reached out with a pincer and gave Maul a sharp jab in the back of his left thigh, causing him to jump forward. The droid muttered, “Don’t make things worse.”

As Maul began to follow Sidious, he glanced back at the bottom of the orb for a final look at the two surviving fish. The small yellow-eyed fish was hungrily biting into a dead fish. The large gray fish hovered a short distance away and appeared to be

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watching the yellow-eyed fish with some interest before its eyes shifted to look at Maul. Maul hurried into the passage, followed by the droid.

The training room exceeded all of Maul's expectations. So did his punishment.

But he survived.

Chapter Two

“Begin!” the droid said.

Maul ran fast across the training room floor, heading straight for the wall. Several months after his arrival in the training room, he was familiar with the routine. He launched off the floor with his left foot, hit the wall with his right, and ran several steps up the wall before he kicked away, flipping his body backward through the air. He landed on his feet, then sprinted back toward the wall and repeated the exercise again. And again.

And again and again.

The six-legged droid watched each move, making sure Maul performed the exercise exactly as Sidious had instructed. Sidious had told Maul that the exercise was designed to build strength, agility, and muscle memory. Sidious had also stressed that if Maul’s timing was off and he flipped away from the wall incorrectly, he could wind up with a broken neck.

Maul continued the exercise until the droid told him to stop. As he landed on his feet, he felt his heart hammering within his small chest. He wanted desperately to rest on the floor, but resting was not allowed until the droid said so.

“Your timing has improved,” the droid said. Rapidly extending one of its pincer arms, it swiped Maul with an electrode, giving the boy a shock.

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Maul bared his teeth and snarled at the droid. Although he knew that the droid was simply carrying out Master Sidious's orders, teaching Maul to be prepared to deal with pain at any moment, he still resented getting shocks when he had not done anything wrong. The droid stared back at Maul through emotionless photoreceptors. Maul could anticipate many things, but he never knew when the droid was about to shock him. The droid was too fast.

However, Maul had learned much during his time with the droid in the training room. The room had special exercise equipment and weapons, as well as computer consoles that had been programmed to educate and challenge Maul's mind and mechanical abilities. He could identify hundreds of star systems, assemble complicated three-dimensional puzzles, and pinpoint the vulnerabilities of nearly every native creature on Mustafar. And in addition to running up walls, he could walk on his hands, climb swiftly up a rope, trot across a taut wire, and leap headfirst through an energy ring and come up standing.

"Go to console three," the droid commanded.

Maul went to the third computer console and seated himself before the computer's holoprojector. As he inserted both hands into the console's grip sockets, he wondered what the test would be about this time.

The holoprojector displayed a sequence of three different star systems and rotated each display so Maul could see the holographic stars and their respective orbiting planets from various angles. Then the computer cut off the projector, leaving Maul staring at empty air. The computer said, "Identify the second, first, and third systems, in that order."

"Malastare, Eriadu, and Denon," Maul answered quickly. He hoped the computer would next ask him to name the trade route that linked all three systems, because he knew the answer was the Hydian Way.

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But the computer said, “The Malastare system includes three gas giants. Name the remaining planets that have more than one moon.”

“Malastare and...Cogalle!” Maul said, his slight delay earning him a sharp sting in the palm of his left hand. Maul was still wincing in pain when the computer’s audio speaker erupted with a recorded beast’s roar.

“Identify the species,” the computer droned.

“Tulus.” Maul suddenly felt searing pain in his right hand, and he corrected himself. “Northern tulus!”

The questions continued for several minutes. Maul made only three more mistakes. When the computer was done, he removed his aching hands from the console sockets and massaged his knuckles. As he rose from his seat, the six-legged droid said, “Go to the ring.”

The droid followed Maul to the ring, a circular platform that was elevated thirty centimeters above the training room floor. Maul hopped onto the platform while the droid ambled over to a nearby rack of weapons and selected a slender staff made of wood. Gripping the staff with a single pincer, the droid climbed onto the platform and faced Maul. “I will attempt to strike you. You will attempt to dodge the strike. Each successful strike or dodge counts as one point. Knocking an opponent off the platform counts as three points. The exercise ends when one of us has scored five points. Understood?”

“Yes.” The word was barely out of Maul’s mouth when the staff connected with the side of his left leg. He grunted in pain and anger.

“You forgot to jump,” the droid said in a mocking tone. “My point.”

The droid swung again, this time angling for Maul’s right leg. Maul jumped. The droid let the staff’s tip bounce off the platform and brought it up sharply to strike the bottom of Maul’s right foot. Maul tumbled across the platform and came up standing, his eyes burning with fury at the droid.

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“That must have hurt,” the droid said. “The next strike will hurt more.” The droid made a quick jab toward Maul, but the boy threw his body to the side and rolled, careful not to go over the edge of the platform.

“Your point,” the droid said as it tossed the staff into the air. Maul ignored the airborne staff and kept his eyes on the droid. The droid caught the staff with a different pincer, then leaped forward. Maul dived under the droid, and as he somersaulted across the platform, he heard the staff whoosh past his head.

“Your point again,” the droid said. “We are tied.” The droid tossed the staff back and forth between three pincers, then seized it with a single pincer and rotated its arm so the staff spun like a propeller. The droid increased the speed of the rotation, transforming the staff into a barely visible blur.

Expecting the droid to advance toward him, Maul braced himself to jump away. He was not prepared when the droid threw the spinning staff directly at him, and he felt the slap of hard wood against the side of his face. The staff fell away from Maul and landed between him and the droid.

“I hope you are learning from this,” the droid said. “The score is three to two.” The droid stepped forward and reached for the staff.

Maul felt a rush of anger. The droid’s pincer was still descending for the staff when the weapon leaped from the platform and flew toward Maul. Maul caught the staff with both hands as he glared at the droid.

The droid backed up. Maul held the staff out in front of him. He didn’t know how the staff had sailed into his grip, and he wasn’t sure what to do next. The droid had not mentioned that the staff could move by itself or said whether Maul would gain points if he obtained the staff or struck back at the droid.

“You’ve never done *that* before,” the droid said, sounding surprised.

Maul didn’t know what the droid was talking about. “The staff jumped. I...I only caught it.”

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"I must summon Master Sidious immediately." The droid's photoreceptors blinked and turned yellow as it transmitted a silent signal.

Maul wondered what he had done wrong. Then he wondered whether the droid might be trying to trick him by pretending to contact Sidious, and whether it might be preparing to attack again. The droid's photoreceptors flickered back to red, but it did not budge from its position on the opposite side of the ring. Maul continued clutching the wooden staff, his eyes locked on the droid.

Sidious entered the training room. Maul held tight to the staff but turned to his Master. Facing Maul, Sidious came to a stop at the edge of the elevated platform and said, "Tell me what happened."

"The droid and I were exercising, Master Sidious." Maul held the staff out before him. "This landed in the middle of the ring. Then it...it jumped up and landed in my hands."

Sidious nodded as if he understood. "Maul, what did you feel just before the staff jumped up?"

Maul glanced at the droid. "The score was three to two, Master. The droid was winning." He looked at Sidious. "I was thinking that the exercise isn't fair. The droid can hit me, but I can't hit back."

"Few things in life are fair, young one." Lowering his voice, Sidious continued, "But I did not ask you what you were *thinking*. I asked...what did you *feel*?"

Maul looked at the droid again. "I felt angry, Master."

Sidious smiled brightly. "Good. Good!" Without taking his eyes off Maul, he turned his head slightly and said to the droid, "Prepare my cruiser."

"Yes, Master Sidious," said the droid as it stepped down from the ring.

"Come along, Maul," Sidious said. "We're going for a ride."

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Sidious's cruiser was a sleek vessel with a long prow, its aft area bracketed by angular fins that folded inward during landings. It raced through hyperspace, the dimension of faster-than-light travel. Sidious was on the cruiser's bridge and had left Maul alone, belted into the cruiser's passenger compartment. The boy sat quietly, his feet extending only a few centimeters over the edge of his seat.

Maul peeked through a rectangular viewport to see the luminous cascade of hyperspace. He had been excited to leave Mustafar, but he was also nervous, because he didn't know where his master was taking him or what the purpose of their journey was. Earlier, when they'd boarded the cruiser, Maul had briefly wondered if Sidious intended to take him to a faraway, extrasolar place to kill him. But after some thought, he decided it was unlikely that his Master would *take* him somewhere to kill him. If Sidious wanted him dead, he would not waste time traveling across hyperspace to get the job done.

The journey did not last long. Maul heard the cruiser's hyperdrive engine winding down. He continued gazing through the viewport. A moment later, the bright colors of hyperspace melted away and were replaced by a field of stars. The cruiser banked to port, and Maul saw they had arrived in the orbit of a small planet. He recognized a cluster of stars and realized they were still in the Atravis sector.

The cruiser descended to the planet's surface and landed. Sidious stepped into the passenger compartment, glanced at Maul, and motioned him to get out of his seat. As Maul unclasped his safety belt and lowered himself to the deck, Sidious passed his hand over a wall-mounted control switch, which simultaneously opened the starboard hatch and extended the boarding ramp. Maul followed his Master out of the cruiser.

"Welcome to Tosste," Sidious said.

A murky yellow sky hung over the bluish-gray terrain. Maul gazed across a wide area of mostly flat land and noticed some strangely angular rock formations in the distance. The ground

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was covered by sporadic clumps of stones and boulders. Maul saw no sign of movement.

“Take a good look,” Sidious said. “We are standing upon what was once the bottom of an ocean. If it ever had a name, that name was lost to time many eons ago. Here, the only historic records are the geographic evidence.” Sidious took a few steps away from Maul and looked toward the horizon. “It’s hard to believe that Tosste was once home to billions of life-forms. While life on other worlds evolved and reached for the stars, Tosste’s inhabitants were never so inspired. They stayed here. They died here. And what is their legacy? Nothing but fossils.” He shook his head sadly. “To live without leaving a mark is a terrible thing. To die forgotten is even worse.” He turned to face Maul. “It is...irresponsible.”

Sidious’s words chilled Maul. Was his Master implying that he was irresponsible? He wasn’t sure. He stood very still and remained silent.

Sidious looked at the horizon again. “Walk with me.”

Leaving the cruiser behind, they proceeded to a nearby outcropping of bedrock, which was bordered by a broad field covered by small stones. The tops of a few large boulders loomed over the stones. Sidious and Maul stopped at the edge of the bedrock. Surveying the stones, Sidious said, “What do you see?”

“I see rocks, Master Sidious.”

Sidious frowned. Then he pointed to the center of the field of stones and said, “Go stand over there.”

Maul always felt especially vulnerable when he could not see his Master, but he did as he was told, stepping across the stones until he reached the designated spot. He stopped.

“Turn around.”

Maul turned to face his Master. Sidious stood with his legs apart, his hands clasped behind his back. Sidious said, “I suspect that every creature that ever lived on Tosste did not think much about rocks either. I had hoped that you would be smarter. I’ll

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ask you again. What do you see, spread out on the ground all around you?”

Maul’s yellow eyes darted back and forth. He saw only rocks. Some were pebbles, others large stones, and there were the tops of a few boulders. As ever, he did not want to disappoint his Master, but he did not know any other answer than the one he had already given. Returning his gaze to his Master’s face, he said hesitantly, “I see rocks, Master Sidious. Thousands of rocks.”

Something hard slammed into Maul’s left shoulder blade. He ducked as he spun to confront his attacker, and as he moved, he saw the object that had struck him. It was a stone, which fell on the rocks near his feet.

Maul looked across the bluish-gray landscape. Not a trace of movement. No one had been standing behind him.

Another stone smashed into Maul’s right bicep. He grunted as he spun again, this time to look back at his Master.

Sidious had not moved. His hands remained behind his back. But from the trace of a wicked smile on the Man’s face, Maul suddenly knew the stones weren’t flying by themselves.

Lifting his gaze to the sky, Sidious said, “The creatures that once roamed this now dead ocean, they lacked imagination. Ultimately, that is why they all perished. They failed to see...potential.”

Potential?! Maul suddenly sensed a small stone whizzing toward his head. He raised his hand to deflect the stone as he ducked, but the stone sailed past his fingers and clipped one of his horns. “Weapons!” Maul shouted. “I see weapons!”

Sidious sighed. “The correct response is...”

“I see weapons, Master Sidious!”

“Not fast enough,” Sidious said as a stone smashed into Maul’s lower back.

Maul crouched and grabbed the nearest rock. He no sooner lifted it from the ground than he felt it burning into his hand. He yelped as he reflexively opened his fingers and let the rock fall.

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How could the rock have generated such intense heat? He suspected it was his Master's trickery.

"Oh, come now," Sidious said impatiently. "Almost any humanoid with fingers can do *that*."

Two stones smacked into the backs of Maul's legs, knocking him off his feet. He gasped as his small body fell on the hard rocks. Looking up, he saw two more stones rise from the ground. He twisted his body fast, trying to shield his head.

"Maybe I was wrong about you being special," Sidious said as he watched the two stones strike Maul. "Maybe you are just as useless and stupid as—"

Several stones hurtled up from the ground around Maul's body. Battered and bruised, Maul glared at Sidious. The stones sailed through the air, all heading straight for his Master.

Sidious whipped one hand out from behind his back and extended it before him. The rocks stopped in mid-flight, then fell to the ground. "Is that the best you can do?" Sidious sneered. "I should crush you now."

Maul snarled as he jumped to his feet and swiped at the air with both hands. Dozens of rocks launched up from around Maul and raced toward Sidious. Sidious moved his other hand out from behind his back and flexed his fingers. The approaching rocks rebounded as if they had struck an invisible shield.

Some of the rebounding rocks fell near Maul's feet. Surprised, he stumbled back. He wasn't sure what had just happened.

"Well done, young one," Sidious said as the dust settled around him. "You passed the test." He began walking slowly toward Maul. "The droid told me that you moved the staff without touching it, but I had to see what you could do with my own eyes. Did you feel it? Did you feel the power of your anger?"

"Yes, Master Sidious," Maul responded automatically. Until that moment, he had not known that he had in fact been responsible for making the staff jump up from the ring in the training room. He looked at the rocks on the ground. He hadn't

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given any thought to launching them through the air either. He had just...done it.

Sidious came to a stop beside Maul. Looking down at the boy, he smiled and said, "I want to show you something. Stay close to my side."

Sidious extended his arms. Maul heard a rumbling sound and then saw stones sliding and bouncing away from two of the larger boulders that were about fifteen meters away, partially embedded in the ancient seabed. He realized the two boulders were rising slowly, as if an invisible giant were pulling them up from the ground. Dust and dirt fell away from both boulders as they tore free from the planet's surface. Maul watched with wonder as they ascended several meters into the air.

Sidious flicked his fingers. The two boulders launched even higher. He flexed his wrists, and the boulders spun around together like a pair of enormous dancers. He moved his hands apart, and the distance between the spinning boulders increased. Then Sidious clapped his hands together. Still spinning, the boulders swung into each other and collided with a thunderous crash. Shattered chunks and bits of rock exploded in all directions.

Watching the rocky debris rain down from the yellow sky, Maul said, "How, Master Sidious? How?"

"With the Force," Sidious said solemnly.

Maul looked at Sidious, hoping desperately to learn more.

"The Force is an energy field," Sidious continued. "It radiates throughout the galaxy. It is everywhere. It flows between all living things and every inanimate object. It is between us. It is between the stones, the cruiser over there..." He gestured to his starship. "...everywhere. Some beings—some very fortunate beings who are strong with the Force from the day they are born—are able to manipulate and control the Force. They can use its power to do incredible things. You and I, Maul, are such beings."

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Maul looked at the two holes in the ground where the boulders had recently stood, then at the remains of the boulders strewn across the area. Knowing that such destructive power flowed through him made him feel very pleased. He smiled.

Seeing the boy's expression, Sidious said, "You and I shall return to this world often. Here I will teach you the ways of the Force. But because the Force can be very dangerous to those who don't fully understand it, there is one rule you must obey. You must never reveal your powers to anyone else until I say you are ready. For now, the Force is our secret. No one else may know about it. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master Sidious," Maul said, then quickly added, "But the droid saw the staff jump in the ring. Does the droid know...about the Force?"

"The droid knows just enough to help you in your training."

"Master Sidious, I meant...can the droid *use* the Force?"

Sidious chuckled. "No, boy. The droid is just a machine. Machines can't use the Force. But remember, the droid is a teaching tool. You are not allowed to use the Force against the droid."

"Yes, Master Sidious." Maul bit his lip.

"You have another question?"

"Master, you said I must not reveal my powers to anyone else. Who is 'anyone else'?"

Sidious pursed his lips, then said, "So far, you have lived a sheltered life, but it is only a matter of time before you encounter other beings. Most life-forms are oblivious to the Force. They don't realize that the Force binds the galaxy together. They cannot draw power from the Force." Sidious patted Maul's bruised shoulder. "Most people fear what they don't understand."

"Master Sidious, do you have to be angry to make the Force work?"

"Not all the time," Sidious said. "But it helps."

Maul stared at the ground. "Are there others like us, Master?"

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Sidious knelt beside Maul so their eyes were on the same level. “Listen very carefully, boy. There are others who use the Force. But they are not...like...us.”

Chapter Three

“Tell me what you know about the Jedi, Maul.”

Sidious and Maul were inside the training room in the Mustafar facility. Sidious stood beside the six-legged droid. The droid was operating a winch that controlled a long metal cable that extended to the ceiling. Maul was hanging upside down, his small body wrapped in chains, dangling from the winch’s cable. Eight meters below Maul’s inverted head was a large open vat of acid.

“I know only what I’ve learned from datatapes, Master,” Maul gasped in response. Speaking was difficult because of the chain that was drawn tightly across his throat. His wrists were manacled behind his back, and as he struggled to free his hands, the droid began ticking at the winch’s crank, slowly lowering Maul from the ceiling. He calculated that at the rate he was descending, he had about ten minutes to escape. “The Jedi,” he continued, “are warriors who are strong with the Force. They use weapons called lightsabers. They are based on the planet Coruscant. They serve the Galactic Republic as peacekeepers.”

Sidious smiled. “That’s according to the data-tapes. But what I am about to tell you is the *truth*.” He stepped away from the droid and began walking in a wide circle around the vat of acid. “The Jedi Order was founded twenty-five thousand years ago by

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a group of beings who were strong with the Force. Before the Jedi Order, such Force-sensitive beings were isolated instead of united. Some were regarded as wizards. Others as demons. There were not many. Nearly all were considered unique on their own worlds. They were strong, powerful individuals. Free to live and die as they wished.

“But the Jedi Order changed all that. They started by analyzing the Force to understand its power. They found it had a wide spectrum that was influenced by emotions. They debated their findings. Over time, they discovered there was much they could not understand, and they chose to believe what they wanted to believe. They believed some mysteries were best left unsolved. They believed that the Force itself was testing them. Like narrow-minded, superstitious children, they *created* explanations for the Force.

“And rather than embrace the full spectrum of the Force, the Jedi ignored the infinite shades of gray that stretched between light and darkness. They declared the light side of the Force was good and the dark was evil. To them, there could be no in-between, no middle ground.” Sidious let out an exasperated sigh. “It’s one thing to examine an energy field that permeates the galaxy. But to give an energy field characteristics of good and evil? One might as well say, ‘That cloud wants to protect us from solar radiation, but that other cloud wants to strike us dead with lightning.’

“And then the Jedi declared that to be born with Force powers was not a gift or a curse. They insisted it was a *calling*. They proclaimed the Force should never be used for selfish purposes, that all Force-sensitive beings were obligated to use their powers for the benefit of others.” Sidious shook his head ruefully. “Many Force users joined the Jedi Order, but the Jedi were not satisfied with their numbers. They sought out the so-called wizards and demons, and gave them three options. Join the Jedi, cease using Force powers, or die.”

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Sidious paused to look at Maul. Maul had traveled almost halfway to the acid vat. He had already wriggled his left hand out of the manacles and was now working to free his right.

“Join the Jedi,” Sidious said. “Relinquish your individuality and freedom, and fight only when the Jedi tell you to fight. *Cease using Force powers.* One might as well tell an ordinary life-form to stop living. *Die...* Well, I don’t believe that requires an explanation. And so, the Jedi not only increased their ranks but destroyed those who disagreed with them.

“The Jedi convinced the Galactic Republic that they could be the Republic’s guardians. The Jedi Order thrived, and they expanded their authority beyond the Core Worlds. They used their powers and their lightsabers to vanquish those who opposed them. For many millennia, the Jedi were unchallenged. And they grew confident. So confident that they could hardly imagine the possibility that some Jedi did not *want* to be Jedi.

“But almost seven thousand years ago, a group of Jedi rebelled against their own kind. The battle that ensued lasted one hundred years. The so-called peacekeepers believed the war was over when they banished the surviving rebels to an uncharted region of the Outer Rim Territories. But the exiles did not meet their end in the Outer Rim. They discovered the Sith species, and they used their powers to conquer the Sith. They became the Sith Lords.”

Sidious raised his right hand slowly and examined his fingernails. “Maul, in your studies of history and the galaxy, have you ever come across any datatapes about the Sith Lords?”

Maul had freed his other hand and was now bent at the waist, lifting his torso so he could work on the chains that were biting into his ankles. He glanced at Sidious and replied, “No, Master.”

“That’s because the Jedi destroyed many records.” Sidious flexed his fingers, then lowered his hand to his side. “The early Sith Lords had one ruler, the Dark Lord of the Sith, and their armies were legion. Eventually, they discovered the path back to Republic space and fought the Jedi in the Great Hyperspace War.

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They lost. But the Sith Lord Naga Sadow survived and managed to preserve his spirit in a tomb.

“Hundreds of years after Sadow’s death, a Jedi named Freedon Nadd revived Sadow’s spirit. Nadd became the new Dark Lord, and he used his powers to conquer the world Onderon. Following Sadow’s example, Freedon Nadd also preserved his own spirit in a tomb. Many centuries later, Nadd’s spirit was awakened by the Jedi Exar Kun, who became the next Dark Lord. Exar Kun allied with a wayward Jedi named Ulic Qel-Droma, and together they established a Sith Order ruled by two, a Master and apprentice. These two Dark Lords of the Sith failed to conquer the Jedi because they wound up fighting each other, as did their successors, another pair of former Jedi, named Revan and Malak. History, it seemed, was repeating itself.” Sidious looked at Maul. “Am I going too fast for you?”

“No, Master.” He was having some difficulty with the chains at his ankles, and he was close enough to the acid that the smell of it was burning his nostrils.

“I neglected to mention that Revan and Malak renamed themselves Darth Revan and Darth Malak. Some historians believe Darth is a contraction of *dark* and *Sith*, while others suggest it was a corruption of *daritha*, an ancient Rakatan word for ‘emperor.’ In any event, the honorific Darth was introduced to the Sith Lords. Following Revan and Malak, other former Jedi assumed the mantle of Dark Lords...and none learned from their predecessors’ mistakes.

“History took a different turn about a thousand years ago, when yet another former Jedi, named Kaan, rose through the ranks of a new order of self-proclaimed Sith Lords. After Kaan became Dark Lord and united thousands of followers, he tried to avoid the mistakes of his predecessors. To avoid infighting, Kaan proposed that all Sith Lords were equals. Kaan’s army became known as the Brotherhood of Darkness.”

The droid’s pincer lost its grip on the winch’s crank. The metal cable slipped half a meter before the droid stopped the

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crank with another pincer. Maul's body fell and jerked violently in the air. He did not cry out but stayed focused on his shackles as he resumed his slow descent to the acid, which was now closer than he'd anticipated.

"At the Battle of Ruusan," Sidious continued, "the Jedi overwhelmed the Brotherhood of Darkness. With surrender not an option, Kaan crafted a Force-fueled weapon called a thought bomb, which would destroy all Force users within its blast radius. The thought bomb killed Kaan, his army, and many Jedi.

"But one Sith Lord survived. Darth Bane. Bane knew that Kaan had been wrong to believe in strength in numbers. Bane knew that too many Sith Lords resulted in too much envy and competition. Everyone wanted to be the leader, the Dark Lord, and nearly everyone was willing to kill other members of the Brotherhood in order to achieve that goal. And so Bane established the Rule of Two. One Sith Master. One Sith apprentice." Sidious looked at Maul, who was still struggling with the chains, and added, "Any more would be to lose control."

Maul broke free, gripped the chain, and swung out, twisting his body in midair so he landed on his feet beside the acid-filled vat. He faced Sidious. Although he did not know his own age, he was now nearly as tall as Sidious's hip. He said, "Master, do the Sith Lords still exist?"

"I would not rule out the possibility," Sidious said. "Just remember, the Jedi do not tolerate Force users outside their order. It is because of them that you and I live in secret. Had they discovered you on Dathomir before I, they would have attempted to mold you into one of their own. A mindless, obedient servant for the Republic. Had they failed, they would have destroyed you. Now that you know the truth, how would you describe the Jedi?"

Maul thought for a moment, then said, "They are cowards, Master. Cowards and tyrants. They are weak."

Sidious smiled. "Do not underestimate the Jedi. Even though they have a fatal flaw, they are formidable."

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“What is their fatal flaw, Master?”

“Compassion.” Sidious looked at the chain that Maul had left swinging back and forth over the vat of acid. “You took much too long to free yourself. You will do the exercise again. But this time, the droid will lower the chain faster.”

Maul bowed. “Yes, Master.”

Chapter Four

“I have a surprise for you, Maul,” Sidious said as he handed a cylindrical metal object to the boy. “Do you know what it is?”

“Yes, Master Sidious,” Maul said as his eyes widened with awe. “It’s a lightsaber. I’ve seen them on holovids.”

They were on the planet Tosste, standing at the center of a grove of gnarled black trees at the edge of a desolate field, not far from Sidious’s cruiser. Sidious had been bringing Maul to Tosste regularly over the past year, as the wide-open spaces allowed opportunities for training that could not be conducted on Mustafar’s volcanic surface. Maul would run for great distances and perform long jumps. Under his Master’s supervision, he fired ranged weapons and explosives and also practiced using the Force to lift and move objects. Maul never knew when Sidious would bring him to Tosste, or what plans Sidious might have for him there, but he always looked forward to any trip away from Mustafar. Even if he was required to do rigorous exercises at their destination, he still regarded such excursions as adventures.

Maul turned the lightsaber over in his hand, testing its grip. He held it away from his body, just as he had seen Jedi hold their weapons in the educational holovids he’d studied in Mustafar’s training room.

Sidious said, “What do you think?”

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"It weighs less than I thought, Master."

"It's a training saber. The same kind used by Jedi younglings."

Maul wondered how his Master had obtained the weapon. But he didn't ask.

"That's the activation switch," Sidious said, pointing to a green switch on the lightsaber's grip. "Press it with your thumb."

Maul thumbed the switch. A brilliant amber blade of pure energy flashed out from the emitter at the end of the grip, accompanied by a loud hum. Holding tight to the grip with both hands, Maul could feel the power of the weapon. He grinned, unable to conceal his delight.

"That's it," Sidious said. "Feel the energy? Now, go on...." Sidious made a waving gesture. "Test it."

Stepping away from Sidious, Maul made a tentative jab at the air, then swung the lightsaber back and forth. The weapon's hum changed pitch as the blade moved. Maul also noticed how the lightsaber illuminated the surrounding trees. He shifted his stance and faced a thick, twisted limb that jutted out from one of the gnarled trees. He looked to his Master.

"I know what you're thinking," Sidious said. "Will a training saber cut through that tree?" Sidious shrugged. "A Jedi would hesitate to share this information, but...well, I am not a Jedi. Training sabers *can* be adjusted for greater power, but the process is a bit time consuming. You might try this instead." Sidious reached into a deep pocket, removed another lightsaber, and held it out to Maul.

Maul looked at the weapon in his Master's hand. He switched off the training saber, barely noticing how its humming sound fizzled out, and exchanged it for the proffered lightsaber. He noticed that the grip was heavier than the training saber's. He thumbed the activation switch.

A red beam flashed from the weapon's emitter and hummed to life. Maul immediately sensed that the blade was even more powerful. He looked again at the gnarled tree's limb, then glanced at Sidious. Sidious nodded. Maul jumped forward and

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sent the lightsaber's blade in a downward slash through the limb. He had expected at least to hear some kind of a cracking noise as the limb separated from the tree, but the blade sliced through the limb with a continuous whoosh, as effortlessly as a bird's wing slicing through air. And then the severed limb crashed loudly against the ground.

"Well done," Sidious said.

Maul swept the blade through the fallen limb again and again. With each sweep, he marveled at how cleanly the blade sliced through wood. From what he'd seen on the holovids, he knew the weapon was just as effective with dense rock and thick metal.

After he had reduced the tree's limb to diced chunks, he turned his attention to the tree's trunk and kept swinging. Sidious did not stop him.

When Maul finished with the tree, he reluctantly returned the lightsaber to his Master. Sidious said, "Now, it is time for you to meditate."

"Yes, Master." Maul turned and walked out of the grove, heading into the neighboring field. Sidious had trained him to relax his mind and body by closing his eyes and visualizing a dark, comfortable nothingness, leaving himself open to the power of the Force. Maul enjoyed meditating. It always left him feeling stronger.

He had taken only a few steps into the field when his foot struck something that moved. He looked down and saw a dinko.

From his studies, Maul knew about dinkos. They were nasty palm-sized creatures—not that anyone would want to pick one up. The dinko had powerful, perpetually moving rear legs that were naturally equipped with serrated spurs, two pairs of grasping claws on its chest, and extremely sharp fangs. The grasping claws were especially feared, as dinkos used them to grab on to a victim's finger or nose and would not let go unless surgically removed or killed. Even more notorious was the dinko's stinking venom. Because dinkos were native to Proxima

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Dibal, a planet situated on the far side of the galaxy, Maul wondered how a dinko had ever arrived on Tosste.

The dinko sprayed venom directly into Maul's face. Maul flinched as the venom hit him, stinging his eyes. He howled, then brought his boot down hard on the creature. He felt a certain satisfaction as he removed his heel from the crushed dinko and inspected its remains. Pleased at the way he had dealt with the dinko, he turned to look back at his Master.

"You flinched," Sidious said without pleasure. "You were afraid of the dinko?"

"Yes, Master. But I controlled my fear." Maul stated his claim with great certainty.

Sidious responded with a nod. But from experience, Maul knew his Master was displeased. He also knew a punishment would come.

They returned to Mustafar. Maul ate his evening meal as usual. He was not confined to a sensory deprivation suit or forced to sleep on a hard floor. The atmosphere controls in his quarters were not turned off.

No punishment came the next day, or the next, or anytime soon. Eventually, Maul forgot about the dinko incident on Tosste.

And then one night, after a particularly exhausting series of exercises, Maul went to his quarters in the training room. After he entered his quarters, the door hissed closed behind him. He undressed in the darkness. Then he turned back the coverlet that was draped over his sleep mat, and a dinko jumped straight at him.

Maul was startled. He batted the dinko away but missed when he tried to stomp it to death. He hesitated, fearing that its claws would tear into his bare foot.

Another dinko jumped out from a corner. That dinko was followed by another, and then another. Maul realized the room was filled with the creatures.

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The boy ran to the door and slapped the button to open it. The door remained shut. He tried to turn on the lights. The lights stayed off. In the darkness, one dinko jumped onto Maul's shoulder and dug its claws into his ear. Another latched on to one of his toes. Maul cried and screamed as he tried to shake them off. The dinkos sprayed their venom and blinded him. The stench was nauseating. Maul threw his body against the walls in a desperate attempt to crush them.

It took Maul almost an hour to kill all the dinkos. When he was done, he passed out on the floor of his gore-filled quarters.

The door did not open until the next morning. It slid back to reveal Sidious standing in the doorway. He looked at Maul's inflamed skin, swollen eyes, and bloody hands and feet. He said, "Do not flinch again."

Maul understood. He learned. He obeyed. And after his test against the dinkos, he never ever flinched.

Chapter Five

“Hold still,” said the six-legged droid as it wiped blood from Maul’s rib cage.

Maul squirmed on the edge of the metal table and said through clenched teeth, “You have the bone-knitter on the wrong setting.”

“No, I don’t,” said the droid as it moved the medical tool deeper into the wound on Maul’s left side. Then it repeated, “Hold still.”

They were in the expansive training room in the Mustafar facility. Five months had passed since Sidious had begun training Maul in lightsaber combat. In recent days, the droid had been teaching him how to throw blades with great accuracy, and also how to dodge and catch blades that the droid threw at him while he did his exercises. As for running up walls and flipping backward to the floor, Maul had become so adept that he could do it with his eyes closed. However, he had been unprepared when, a few minutes earlier, he had kicked away from the wall and straight into one of the droid’s waiting pincers.

The droid set aside the bone-knitter, then sprayed an exotic salve over Maul’s skin. “You should be relieved that Master Sidious was not present when you allowed me to break two of

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your ribs,” the droid said. “He would have been most displeased.”

“I didn’t *allow* you to break my ribs,” Maul said as the droid began wrapping a bandage around his torso. “I thought you were standing near me to watch me exercise.”

“Well, you know what Master Sidious would say.” Adjusting the pitch and tone on its vocabulator to perfectly mimic Sidious, the droid rasped, “*To leave yourself vulnerable is an open invitation to death.*” Switching back to its usual voice, the droid said, “Still, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you. It was an accident.”

The droid’s words surprised Maul. The droid had never before imitated Sidious or apologized to Maul. No one had ever apologized to Maul before. Maul said, “I will be more careful next time.” Then he looked at the droid’s red photoreceptors and added, “Do you have a name? I learned from the computer that many droids have names.”

The droid responded with a chattering noise that sounded like a cross between grinding gears and laughter. “I was programmed and engineered for training and discipline. My designation is TD-D9. If you wish, you may call me Deenine.”

“Thank you, Master Deenine.”

The droid chattered again. “No. Just Deenine.”

“Oh.” Maul was suddenly curious about the droid. “Have you always been on Mustafar, Deenine?”

“No, I’ve visited other worlds. I’ve been to Coruscant, Naboo, and...” The droid flicked its photoreceptors to face Maul and said, “Forget I said that. You didn’t hear that from me.”

“I won’t tell.”

“Good. You may put on a shirt now.”

Maul eased himself off the table and reached for the shirt he’d been wearing earlier. It now had a hole in it, where the droid’s pincer had torn through the fabric, and was stained with blood. But before Maul could pick up the shirt, the droid snatched it and added, “You may put on a *clean* shirt.”

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Maul walked across the training room and stepped through a doorway to enter his quarters. Nearly twice the size of his former room, his quarters had a lighting system that he could control, a sleep mat with a coverlet, and a small trunk for storing clothes. It also had a door that he could open from inside or outside. Except when Sidious or the droid locked him up, he was generally free to go to the training room at any time.

But there was one thing his quarters lacked. A window.

Maul's former room had been in almost every way unmemorable, but it had had a view. He had spent many hours scanning the rocks for Mustafarians and their lava flea mounts, but his memories of that time seemed increasingly dim. Back then he had wished for a view of a different world. Now he wondered if he would ever see the lava flowing into the fiery sea again.

He reached into his trunk and removed a clean black shirt. He thought it was strangely kind of the droid to suggest that he should wear a clean shirt. He had learned about friendship from an educational recording, which showed how some creatures lived and worked together without harming each other. He wondered if the droid might be his friend.

Maul pulled the shirt on and felt a stab of pain at his left side. He gnashed his teeth and took a series of quick and shallow breaths through his nose, careful not to expand his lungs so much that they'd make his ribs hurt. He wondered how long it would take for his ribs to heal.

As he exited his quarters, he said, "Deenine, when will my ribs—?" He stopped short when he saw Sidious standing beside the droid. He had not heard Sidious enter the training room.

Sidious was holding Maul's torn, bloodied shirt. Sidious looked from the droid to Maul and said, "Maul, tell me what happened."

Maul glanced at the droid, then said, "I was training, Master Sidious. I ran up the wall, and when I jumped away from it,

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Deenine stuck out a pincer and broke two of my ribs. It was an accident. Deenine didn't mean to hurt me."

"Really?" Sidious said. "I didn't know the droid was capable of doing anything accidentally. Or that you and... 'Deenine' were on familiar terms." Still holding the torn shirt, Sidious faced the droid. "Is it true? Did you injure Maul by accident?"

"No, Master Sidious," the droid said. "When Maul leaped from the wall, I raised my pincer knowing that it would break his ribs if he did not adjust his body in midair."

"So why did Maul think it was an accident?"

"Because I told him it was an accident, Master Sidious."

"In other words, you lied?"

"Yes, Master Sidious. I lied."

Sidious looked back at Maul. "Have you learned anything from this, Maul?"

Maul glared at the droid. He felt betrayed and angry. He could not believe he had trusted the droid. Looking back at Sidious, he said, "Yes, Master Sidious. I have learned I must not trust anyone. I must be ready to attack and fight back at all times."

"Excellent," Sidious said as he tossed the torn shirt onto the metal table. "And because 'at all times' includes right now, you will now repeat the exercise you were doing with the droid. Only this time, you will avoid breaking any more ribs." Sidious gestured to the nearest wall. "Begin at once."

The droid made a chittering noise, then said, "I beg your pardon, Master Sidious, but I suggest you allow Maul's ribs to heal before he attempts to—"

"I do not recall asking for anyone's opinion," Sidious said, keeping his eyes on Maul. "Especially an opinion from someone who is an admitted liar."

The droid offered no response.

"Now, Maul," Sidious continued, "what *you* said is absolutely true. You *must* be ready to attack and fight back at all times. If your bones were broken during a fight with an actual enemy, do

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you think that enemy would wait for you to heal before attacking you again?”

“No, Master Sidious.”

Sidious gestured again at the wall. “The droid will stand near while you run up the wall and leap back to the floor. At any given moment, the droid might attack. And the droid will not hold back because you are already injured. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Master Sidious.”

Glancing at the droid, Sidious added, “Do you understand?”

“Yes, Master Sidious.” The droid shuffled over to the wall and waited for Maul to run.

Maul went straight for the wall. He tried to ignore his broken ribs, but with each step, he felt the sharp pain intensify. He did not cry out. He would give neither his Master nor the droid the satisfaction of hearing him cry. He was angry at both of them, especially at the droid. He let the pain feed his anger, let his anger feed his strength. He ran up the wall several steps before he kicked off, keeping his left arm close to his side to prevent the droid from striking his rib cage again.

Maul did not think the droid would attack on his first flip away from the wall. He was still in midair when the droid lashed out with violent force. Maul felt his left arm snap as the droid’s swat knocked him clear across the room. Maul crashed into the opposite wall and then everything went dark.

When Maul opened his eyes, he was lying on the sleep mat in his quarters. His upper left arm was heavily bandaged. He pushed himself up carefully. Every part of his body hurt. Moving his right hand over to his left side, he felt that the bandages were wet with blood. And then he noticed a familiar shadow fall across the floor from the doorway.

“Master Sidious is very displeased,” said TD-D9 as it stepped into Maul’s quarters. “Very displeased with both of us.”

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Maul noticed the droid was carrying a medkit. He looked away from the droid and faced the wall. "Go away and leave me alone."

"Your bandages need to be changed."

"I said go away!"

"But if don't apply bacta, your wounds won't heal. They'll become infected and—"

"You keep your claws off me! I'll take care of myself!"

The droid chattered a mechanical sigh, then placed the medkit on the floor beside Maul's sleep mat. But as the droid retreated for the doorway, it paused and said, "There's something I want to tell you, Maul. I want you to know that I—"

"I don't care what you have to say," Maul interrupted. "You're a liar."

"That's right, I lied," TD-D9 said. "But I didn't lie to you. I lied to Master Sidious."

Maul listened.

"When I told Master Sidious that I lied to you, that was a lie. The truth is that I accidentally broke your ribs. But if I had told Master Sidious the truth, he would have destroyed me."

Maul looked away from the wall and scowled at the droid. "Are you also going to tell me that breaking my arm was an 'accident' too?"

"No, Maul. I did that on purpose. It was the only way to immediately end the exercise. I did not want to prolong your pain. I did not want to hurt you. I hit you so hard that I knocked you out because I did not want Master Sidious to hurt you more than that."

"You broke my arm!"

"I'm sorry for that. But I believe Master Sidious would have done worse."

Maul thought about this, then said, "What makes you think I won't tell Master Sidious that you lied to him?"

"If you do, he'll replace me with another droid. Maybe he'll replace me with a droid who actually enjoys inflicting pain." The

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droid sighed again. "I told you I'm sorry. Your bandages really do need to be changed."

"I'll do it myself," Maul said sullenly. "I don't want to talk with you anymore."

The droid walked out through the doorway, leaving the medkit behind. Maul looked at the medkit and wondered if his Master or the droid had done something to the bandages so he would be in even more pain after he put them on.

He faced the wall that was opposite the doorway. He thought of the tapestries that decorated the walls in Sidious's chamber, and how one tapestry concealed the passage to the training room. He wondered if a secret passage might be hidden behind the wall right in front of him.

Too weak to walk, he crawled over to the wall and pressed his right hand against it. The wall did not yield to his pressure, but as he removed his hand from its surface, he saw he had left traces of blood. He had forgotten that he had touched his wounded side earlier.

He recalled his Master's words on Tosste: *To live without leaving a mark is a terrible thing. To die forgotten is even worse.*

Maul reached to his wound again, then extended his index finger and drew a vertical smear of blood directly onto the wall. He then drew another vertical line to the right of the first one and then added two horizontal lines that connected with the vertical lines to form a rectangle. Next Maul concentrated on the area within the rectangle. It took him just over twenty minutes to fill the rectangle with a drawing of what he remembered of Mustafar from his view through the window of his old room. By the time he was done, he felt very tired.

Maul crawled back onto his sleep mat and lay down again, positioning his head so he could look at the drawing he'd made with his own blood. He wished he could leap into the drawing and run away. He was still looking at the drawing as he drifted off to sleep.

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When Maul next awoke, he was still in his quarters but dressed in fresh bandages. He realized that TD-D9 must have taken care of him while he was sleeping. He also noticed that all the walls had been cleaned, and that his drawing had been completely erased.

TD-D9 appeared in the doorway. Maul frowned at the droid. TD-D9 said, "Master Sidious instructed me to bring you to him now."

Maul decided it was best to not mention the drawing. He thought it would hurt for him to get up, but he felt surprisingly better than he had earlier. He suspected the droid had given him medicine while he had slept. Leaving his quarters, he followed the droid out through the training room and up through the passage that led to Sidious's private chamber. As they walked, Maul said, "Deenine, do you know if Master Sidious intends to kill me?"

"I don't think so," TD-D9 replied. "He has invested so much time into your training that I suspect he wants you to stay alive. But I don't think you should have drawn that picture on the wall."

Maul's steps did not falter as he continued following the droid, but his mind was suddenly racing. He wondered what consequence he might suffer because of the drawing. He said, "Did Master Sidious see the drawing?"

"I don't know. I erased it right after you fell asleep."

"Then how would he even know about the drawing...unless you told him?"

"I didn't have to tell him," TD-D9 said. "You should know by now, child...Sidious knows everything."

Before Maul could ask the droid any more questions, they exited the passage. They found Sidious standing beside the hovering watery orb. Maul noticed that the orb had been restocked with living fish. He spotted the two survivors of the previous menagerie lurking at the bottom of the orb. The big gray fish was looking away from Maul, but the smaller one with

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red and black stripes had one yellow eye fixed on the boy. The striped fish had grown larger since the last time Maul had seen him.

Sidious looked at Maul, then frowned. "Tell me, do you think I've been rough on you?"

"No, Master Sidious."

"You do understand that your training serves a greater purpose?"

"Yes, Master Sidious."

Sidious smiled. "I suspect that others might question my teaching methods, but I am glad you do not. I can assure you that you are an excellent pupil. Not once did you cry out during your recent exercises. Not once. You are an exceptionally strong boy, and you are becoming stronger every day."

"Thank you, Master Sidious," Maul said as he bowed, ignoring the pain of his aching ribs.

Sidious raised his eyebrows. "Now, there is another matter that has come to my attention. Evidently, you are not entirely satisfied with your quarters. You miss the view that you once had of Mustafar. Is this correct?"

Without hesitation, Maul replied, "I was not thinking clearly when I drew a picture on my wall, Master Sidious."

"You have no wish to return to your former room?"

"No, Master."

Sidious smiled again. "I didn't think you would want to go back to that little box. But if you missed the sight of Mustafar, you should have told me. After all, seeing Mustafar is something that can be easily arranged." Sidious waved a finger at TD-D9.

The droid responded by firing a tranquilizer dart into Maul's neck. Maul collapsed to the floor. TD-D9 did not attempt to break his fall.

A loud roar awakened Maul. He coughed as he inhaled hot, acrid fumes, and his eyes stung as he opened them. He saw darkness overhead, and for a moment, he thought he was in a

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cave. But then he noticed the darkness was moving and alive with dancing bright red stars. And he suddenly knew what he was really looking at.

Dark clouds. And drifting, burning ashes.

He pushed himself up. He was on a broad slab of rock on Mustafar's surface. The loud roaring sound came from a nearby rocky vent that was spewing lava. He didn't know how long he'd been outside or even how far he was from Sidious's facility. But he knew he had not arrived at this place on his own.

He looked around. He saw no sign of TD-D9 or Sidious, or of any kind of shelter. Although they had not taken away the clothes and bandages he was wearing, they had not left him with any provisions. But he did have something to his advantage. He had his training.

Maul was not scared. He felt free. He could live or perish on this hostile world without anyone to tell him what to do. And then he realized he was not in any way eager to die. He became resolved to survive. He would do anything and everything necessary to stay alive.

He saw a dark shape move past the lava vent. Crouching low to the ground, ignoring the pain from his ribs and left arm, he watched with wonder as a tall, masked Mustafarian rode by on a massive six-legged lava flea. Two more flea-mounted Mustafarians followed.

Maul had no idea where the Mustafarians were headed, whether they were going to a mining camp or back to their remote village. He would track them, find their food, and steal it. If it became necessary to kill them to ensure his own survival, he would gather rocks to strike them dead or strangle them with his own bandages and broken bones. And then he would find his way back to Sidious and prove that he was indeed a strong boy. He would prove that he feared nothing.

He would earn the respect of his Master.

The three Mustafarians moved off. Maul followed them.

Chapter Six

“Ah, you have returned,” Sidious said to Maul, who stood before him in the tapestry-decorated chamber in the Mustafar facility. Sidious was holding a small container of food pellets, which he had been gently pushing into the hovering watery orb to feed the fish. Maul’s head was covered with soot and dirt, and his torso was adorned with ill-fitting, bloodstained Mustafarian armor. Looking at the armor, Sidious smiled. “I see you kept busy during your little outing.”

The spider-legged droid TD-D9 stood a short distance behind Maul. The droid’s right front leg was missing, and one of its left legs was mangled. “I found him outside, Master Sidious,” TD-D9 said, “not far from the landing pad. He’d set a trap. I walked right into it.” Raising one of its pincer arms, the droid held out the shattered remains of its front right leg. “Maul could have destroyed me.”

Sidious set aside the fish food and looked at Maul skeptically. “Is this true? You could have destroyed the droid?”

“Yes, Master Sidious,” Maul replied.

“Then why didn’t you?”

Maul tilted his chin toward the droid. “Because I wanted to bring this thing back to you in pieces.”

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Sidious smiled again. “Maul, do you know how long you were running around on Mustafar’s surface?”

Maul grimaced. “I’m not certain, Master Sidious. I fell asleep twice while I was outside.”

“Well, I’ll tell you, then. You survived outside for seventeen standard days. I doubt very much that many boys your age—and that includes young Mustafarians—could accomplish such a thing without a wealth of provisions and emergency equipment. I commend you.”

Maul bowed, holding his left arm away from his side as he did so.

Sidious noticed the angle of Maul’s arm. “You didn’t heal properly. Your arm must be broken again and reset. Is it painful?”

“Yes, Master Sidious,” Maul said flatly, his tone not even slightly betraying his extreme discomfort. Out of the corner of his eye, he spied the red and black striped fish with yellow eyes swimming near the larger gray fish at the bottom of the nearby orb that was suspended above the circular dining table. The yellow-eyed fish appeared to have grown bigger again.

Sidious looked to TD-D9 and said, “Take Maul to the training room. Attend to his arm. Clean him up. And then bring him back to me.”

“Yes, Master Sidious,” the droid said, then added, “Afterward, do you wish for me to repair my own legs?”

“Yes, of course,” Sidious said.

Leaving Sidious, TD-D9 hobbled after Maul to the training room. Neither spoke once, not even while the droid reset Maul’s broken arm. Thirty minutes later, they returned to Sidious’s chamber. Maul was wearing fresh clothes. His left arm was wrapped in a bacta splint.

Sidious was seated at the dining table beneath the watery orb. Fine cutlery, dinner plates, and drinking goblets were on the table. Facing TD-D9, Sidious said, “You may repair yourself after you bring us dinner.”

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“Yes, Master Sidious,” said the droid, hobbling out of the chamber again.

Sidious looked at Maul as he gestured for the youth to sit in the chair across from his own. Maul was surprised. His Master had never before invited him to dine in the chamber. And because he was extremely hungry, he also felt grateful. Maul bowed to his Master before he sat down. The fish swimming in the watery orb overhead made shimmering shadows across the table’s surface.

“This is a momentous occasion,” Sidious said solemnly as he dragged his finger around the rim of his goblet. “Because my presence is increasingly required on other worlds, I have arranged for you to attend the Academy on the planet Orsis. It is an institution for training paramilitaries for planetary governments. They also train intelligence agents, mercenaries, and assassins, as well as supplying professional combatants for the gladiatorial arenas. It’s a very exclusive school. To be an Orsis cadet is considered quite an honor.”

Maul was astonished. The prospect of leaving Mustafar and attending a school with other students was almost overwhelming.

“The director of the Academy,” Sidious continued, “is a Falleen named Trezza. He’s a bit short and almost two hundred years old, but do not let that fool you. He is as tough as they come, and mind tricks will not work on him. But there are a few minor challenges. Trezza does not know my name and he never will. And to protect my identity, I shall wear a disguise. Understood?”

“Yes, Master,” Maul said, although he could only imagine why his Master wanted to protect his identity.

“You may use your own name, but there is one catch, and this is very important. You are not allowed to use your Force powers on Orsis unless you are alone with me, and unless I grant you permission. When time allows, I will continue to train you in the ways of the Force while you are on Orsis, but you must never use your powers against any other students or faculty members under

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any circumstances. You must never even talk about your powers to anyone else on Orsis. If you disobey this command, the consequences will be most dire. Understood?"

"Yes, Master." He knew what *dire* meant.

Sidious poured a dull-colored liquid into the goblet set before Maul and then his own. Raising his goblet to Maul, Sidious said, "To future endeavors."

As Sidious and Maul drank, TD-D9 hobbled back into the chamber carrying a tray that held plates covered by domed lids. The droid set the covered plates before the seated figures, then said, "Are you finished with me, Master Sidious?"

"Most definitely," Sidious said. Keeping his eyes on Maul, Sidious waved at the droid. TD-D9 lifted off the floor, flew across the chamber, and smashed into the wall. The impact was so great that Maul noticed small shock waves ripple across the suspended orb. The droid's photoreceptors went dead as its ruined body collapsed in a loud crash.

Maul didn't flinch. He thought of all the time he'd shared with the droid, how it had reared him and punished him, and how he'd never expected his Master to destroy it. He wouldn't have the chance to say goodbye, or to destroy the droid himself. All these thoughts raced through his mind, but he didn't flinch.

Smoke began rising from the droid's shattered head. Sidious grinned. "Not the most efficient way to eliminate an old droid we don't need anymore, but that *did* feel good. Now, let's see what's for dinner." Ignoring the smoldering droid across the chamber, Sidious lifted the lid off his plate and revealed there was nothing on it. He sighed. "Oh, well, I wasn't very hungry anyway. How about you, Maul? What's on your plate?"

Maul had no idea what kind of game his Master was playing. He hoped he would find food on his plate but braced himself for disappointment. He removed the lid from his plate to reveal the red and black striped fish he'd watched grow over the past four years. Lying on its side, the fish stared back at him through one eye. Maul saw the fish's gills flex and realized it was still alive.

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Maul didn't flinch.

The fish's eye shifted to look at its former home, the orb above the table, where other fish continued to swim. Maul doubted that Sidious expected him to pick up the fish and insert it back into the orb.

"Go on," Sidious said. "Dig in."

Maul obeyed. He tore into the fish, starting with the head. As he ate, Sidious said, "We will leave for Orsis tonight. Do you have any questions?"

"Yes, Master," Maul said between mouthfuls. "What will be your disguise on Orsis?"

"Naturally," Sidious said, "I shall present myself as a man with a lack of vision."

Chapter Seven

“Welcome to Orsis Academy,” hissed the short male Falleen, a reptilian humanoid with green skin, as he stepped away from the massive desk in his office to greet the two people, a man and a boy, who had just entered. “I am Trezza, the Academy’s director.”

“Thank you for receiving us,” said the man, who wore a bulky old set of cybernetic goggles, a sensor-laden metal bracket that completely concealed his eyes and most of his forehead. He clutched a walking stick in one hand and had his other hand placed on the shoulder of his young companion, who wore loose-fitting black clothes. “Allow me to introduce you to Maul.”

Trezza had already noted the boy’s horns and tattooed visage, and assumed he was a Zabrak. Trezza bowed slightly and said, “Greetings, Maul. You may call me Master Trezza.”

Maul bowed deeply. “I am honored, Master Trezza.”

Returning his attention to the sensor-goggled man, Trezza said, “And how shall I address you, sir?”

Sidious sighed. “With all due respect, I prefer to remain nameless. For practical purposes.”

“Very well,” Trezza replied with a smooth smile, making it evident that he was no stranger to clients who valued privacy above all else. “So, you came here to discuss...?”

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Sidious smiled. "As I mentioned in the holomessage that I sent, I am a modest businessman. But I anticipate my business will expand greatly in years to come and that competition will increase. I shall require a very dedicated bodyguard. One with a good set of eyes. You may have noticed I am somewhat ocularly challenged." Sidious lifted his walking stick and tapped its handle twice against the side of his sensor goggles. "Maul's vision is exceptionally good, and his loyalty is beyond question."

Trezza glanced at Maul again, then returned his attention to the goggled man. "Do you have a certain time frame for when you expect Maul to be...sufficiently *grown* for such a job?"

Sidious chuckled. "My mind is quite made up about Maul. I can afford to wait. I trust you have received the credits I sent for his registration and tuition?"

"Yes," Trezza hissed. He picked up a datapad and examined a readout. "Your payment is in order. However, Maul does have to take a standard physical examination. Also, his age was not indicated on the registration. Our administration would like to know that and some other data for placement purposes and general record keeping."

"For confidentiality reasons," Sidious said smoothly, "I would prefer not to divulge Maul's age. I also request that he not be prodded by any medical droids unless he receives injuries that require immediate attention. I have already made a contribution in addition to the other fees, but I am quite willing to pay more to ensure...privacy."

"That won't be necessary," Trezza said. "Your contribution was exceedingly generous, and very much appreciated. If it is your wish that we keep no records of the boy's enrollment, I personally guarantee that there shall be no records. However, there is one thing we must address. Even though we're a long way from Coruscant, the Jedi Order forbids Orsis Academy from training Force users."

Neither Sidious nor Maul flinched. Sidious smiled and replied, "You are most perceptive, Master Trezza."

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Trezza tapped the side of his nose. “My nose and I have been around a long time, and we’ve met all types. I can smell Force users. I suspect you’re aware of the Jedi Order’s rules and regulations, that they expect me to report any Force-sensitive applicants, but here’s another fact for you. I really don’t care much for the Jedi. The way I see things, if a cadet is Force-sensitive, that’s the cadet’s business. Just don’t make it *my* business.” He looked at Maul. “I don’t know what kind of powers you have, son, but while you’re on my property, no use of the Force. If you can’t handle that, you will be expelled. Am I clear?”

Maul bowed. “Yes, Master Trezza.”

“You are most accommodating,” Sidious said with a polite nod.

“We shall take excellent care of Maul.”

Sidious grimaced. “I wouldn’t want you to show him any favoritism.”

“Of course not,” Trezza said. “I meant only that he will receive the very best education in the arts of combat.” Trezza redirected his gaze to Maul. “Would you like to have a look around the school?”

“Yes, Master Trezza.”

Sidious smiled as he patted Maul’s shoulder. “I believe I’ll join you.” As they exited Trezza’s office, Sidious moved his walking stick back and forth, tapping at the floor in front of him.

Orsis Academy was a sprawling compound. Bordered by a tall wall that was topped by security sensors and automated weapons placements, the school consisted of nine interconnected buildings, three large open courts, and an open field beside a starship landing pad. Sidious’s cruiser rested on the pad next to a drop ship that had just arrived from the aptly named Orsis Orbital Station, the large space station that traveled in a geosynchronous orbit with the planet. In broad daylight, the

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station was visible as a point of light in a fixed position in the sky.

As Trezza guided Maul and Sidious to a wide walkway that spanned two buildings, Maul spotted a stairway that led down to a beach along the seashore. He felt a pang of excitement as he took in the view. He was still having a hard time believing that his Master had brought him to Orsis, that his years of isolation on Mustafar might actually be behind him.

Maul glanced at his Master. Sidious had explained that the sensor goggles were a necessary disguise because he did not want to be recognized on Orsis. Maul wondered, *Why would anyone here recognize Master Sidious?*

Trezza led Maul and Sidious across the walkway, which overlooked one of the open courts. Trezza said, “We place as much importance on computer skills as we do on poison production and assassination techniques. And Orsis offers many opportunities for training programs beyond the walls of the Academy. As cadets mature and progress, they learn to fight and survive in the mountains, forests, deserts, and seas. We have hunting grounds and...”

A loud clattering sounded from the court below. Sidious stopped short with Maul and said, “What’s that racket?”

“Some of our younger cadets are exercising with combat staffs,” Trezza explained. “If you step closer to the rail, you can see them...” Remembering his guest’s sensor goggles, he added, “Oh, please forgive me.”

“That’s quite all right,” Sidious said, his mouth twitching into his smile as he reached up to adjust his goggles. “I can usually see shapes well enough, just not much detail.”

Trezza motioned for Maul to guide Sidious closer to the railing. Maul looked down and saw several dozen cadets, mostly humanoid adolescents, swinging wooden combat staffs at each other. Thanks to his studies on Mustafar, he could identify each cadet’s species. A pair of bug-eyed Rodian boys seemed to be the noisiest with their weapons. Both Rodians were testing their

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staffs against a Nautolan girl, an amphibian with tentaclelike tresses extending from her head. The Nautolan moved quickly and appeared to be very capable of defending herself.

“Right now,” Trezza said, “we have just over five hundred cadets. As you know, we offer programs for ages eight years old and up. Most have enrolled for four- or eight-year programs. We also have a good number of ‘floaters,’ temporary students who come here to refine their skills. Graduates also come back from time to time for the same reason.”

Sidious said, “Bounty hunters?”

“Occasionally. Do you object?”

“Not at all. On the contrary, I’ve met a few very accomplished bounty hunters in my time.” Sidious stroked his chin thoughtfully. “I’ve heard your instructors include a Mandalorian who once fought Jedi. I believe his name was Krakko. Meltch Krakko. Is it true he’s the best?”

Trezza stared quizzically at Sidious’s goggles, then looked back at the cadets below. “He’s still *among* the best, but I regret to inform you that your information is dated. Commander Krakko left us some time ago, returned to his clan. As you may be aware, the Mandalorians are engaged in a civil war.”

“Oh, now that *is* unfortunate,” Sidious said as he patted Maul’s shoulder. “I really had hoped the boy might receive training from a Mandalorian. You see, Maul has been in a few fights, but...well, he can be a bit wild. He lacks finesse. He needs to learn how to make each move count. I don’t suppose you have another Mandalorian about?”

Maul was surprised and embarrassed by his Master’s description of him, but he kept his expression neutral. He almost missed the irritation in Trezza’s voice as the Falleen replied, “Commander Krakko was our *only* Mandalorian instructor. But I’m confident that we can still teach young Maul here some things that he can’t learn anywhere else.” Trezza looked at Maul. “I’ve already agreed to forgo the standard physical examination

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for you, Maul. But now that I'm aware you've 'been in a few fights,' I would appreciate a demonstration of your abilities."

Maul looked to Sidious. Sidious adjusted his goggles and said, "A demonstration? I suppose that does sound like a practical way for you to evaluate Maul."

Trezza led Maul and Sidious into a lift tube and they descended to the court. As Maul stepped out onto the same level as the cadets, he suddenly realized they were all taller than he. Every one of them.

Seeing Trezza, the cadets halted their exercises, lowered their combat staffs, and bowed to him. Trezza gestured to Maul and said, "We have a new cadet. His name is Maul. I'm told he can fight."

One of the Rodians laughed out loud. Trezza shot him an icy look. The Rodian shut his snout.

Trezza cleared his throat. "I'm looking for a volunteer. Will any one of you fight the new cadet?"

Maul did not expect every cadet to raise an arm, tentacle, or equivalent limb into the air and shout in unison with the others, "I volunteer, Master Trezza!"

Trezza looked at Maul. "Remember what I said about the rules on my property, son."

"Yes, Master Trezza." Maul looked at Sidious.

Sidious adjusted his goggles, leaned close to Maul, and whispered, "Select the largest and most muscular student. Introduce yourself. Hurt him. No killing."

As Maul's gaze traveled across the cadets, he peeled off his black shirt, exposing his lean, tattooed torso. He was aware of the many eyes gazing at the bold red and black patterns on his bare flesh. He placed his shirt neatly on the ground. Stepping away from Sidious and Trezza, he overheard one cadet whisper, "Check out his ribs."

Maul breezed past the malodorous Rodians and came to a stop before a teenage Abyssin, a hulking native of the planet Byss. Distinguished by a broad head that held a single eye with a

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slit pupil over a broad, fleshy nose and a mouth full of sharp teeth, the Abyssin stood nearly two meters tall. Maul tilted his head back, looked up into the Abyssin's eye, and said, "I am Maul. Your move."

The Abyssin's nose twitched, and then he blinked his eye in disbelief. When he had volunteered to fight the boy less than a minute earlier, he had never imagined the boy would actually choose him. His eye flicked to see Trezza. Trezza nodded to him.

The Abyssin shifted his feet. Maul stood his ground. All the other cadets stepped back, leaving room for the combatants.

The Abyssin launched a sweeping kick that knocked Maul off his feet, and then lashed out with one hard-muscled arm that connected with Maul in midair. Maul flew across the courtyard and crashed to the ground. Both Rodians roared with laughter. Trezza did not reprimand them.

The Abyssin leaped forward, landing on his powerful legs a short distance from his opponent, and waited for Maul to rise. Maul shook his head as if he were making sure nothing was loose as he slowly pushed himself up from the ground. Once he was on his feet, he turned to face the Abyssin again. Maul threw a jab at the Abyssin's left thigh, just above his knee.

If the Abyssin felt the jab, he didn't show it. He pivoted on one foot and kicked out with the other, catching Maul in the stomach. The sound of the impact made a few cadets wince. Maul was again lifted off his feet. Hitting the ground, his body rolled like a broken doll past several cadets until he came to a stop near the feet of the female Nautolan. The Nautolan looked down at Maul's small, tattooed back, then turned to face Trezza and said, "With all due respect, Master Trezza, this is *not* a fair fight."

"What's that?" Sidious said as he tapped his walking stick against the ground. "Did Maul do something unfair?"

"Not at all," Trezza said. "He simply chose to go up against an older cadet."

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"He does have spirit," Sidious said. Then he muttered, "Curse these old goggles. I can't see a thing."

Maul braced one palm against the ground. His arm trembled as he pushed himself up. The Abyssin stepped closer to Maul, moving up behind him. Maul started to turn to face the Abyssin, but then his legs buckled and he collapsed. Maul squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them. He looked at a cloud overhead, then shifted his gaze to see the Abyssin. Maul gasped, "What's...your name?"

The Abyssin blinked at the boy for a few seconds but finally replied, "Dalok."

Maul twisted his neck away from the Abyssin and his horns dug into the ground. His chest shuddered and then his limbs went slack. He turned his head again, and his eyes rolled up into their sockets before they shifted back to stare in the general direction of the Abyssin. "Your name," Maul repeated. "Please...tell me...what's your name?"

The other cadets quietly moved in around the Abyssin to get a closer look at the defeated boy. Seeing that Maul was thoroughly beaten, the Abyssin knelt beside him, leaned over his face, and said, "I just told you. My name's Dalok. Are you all ri—"

Maul grabbed the back of Dalok's head, pulled Dalok's face up against his own, and sank his teeth into Dalok's fleshy nose. The startled Abyssin screamed. With his teeth and one arm, Maul held tight to Dalok's head while he moved his other hand to grab Dalok's throat.

The surrounding cadets recoiled. Dalok tried to roll away from Maul, but Maul stayed on him, slamming and driving his knees into the nerve clusters in the Abyssin's shoulders. Dalok was flat on his back as he convulsed, his arms flopping uselessly beside him. Dalok passed out.

Maul rose to stand beside Dalok's unconscious body. Turning slowly, he looked at every one of the surrounding cadets, letting them see the Abyssin's blood dripping down his chin and notice that he wasn't even breathing hard. He thought he smelled fear

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from the female Nautolan who had tried to call off the fight. He didn't know how old she was, but noted she was slightly taller than he. When his yellow-eyed gaze fell on the Rodians who'd laughed at him, he spat at the ground.

An astonished Trezza looked at the goggled man beside him. "You said Maul has been in a few fights. Just how many is 'a few'?"

"I'm not sure, really," Sidious said with a shrug. "Obviously, I never actually *saw* any of his fights. Tell me, did he win this one?"

"He almost beat his opponent to death."

"Did he, now?" Sidious chuckled as he elbowed Trezza. "I *told* you he was a bit wild."

The Nautolan moved past Maul, and one of her head tresses brushed against his arm. She knelt beside Dalok and checked his pulse. Looking to another cadet, who stood gaping nearby, she said, "His nose will heal but he needs a medpac." As the cadet went for the medpac, the Nautolan turned to face Maul. Maul could see his own reflection in the Nautolan's large black eyes. Although he could not comprehend why, he did not want her to be afraid of him.

Keeping her eyes fixed on Maul, the Nautolan said, "You *did* know that Dalok's an Abyssin, didn't you? That Abyssins have regenerative abilities?"

In fact, Maul was already aware of this, but that particular bit of knowledge had not crossed his mind when he'd challenged the Abyssin. He'd simply selected the largest and most muscular student, just as Sidious had instructed. Maul looked away from the Nautolan and let his gaze flick back and forth at the Rodians' snouts. "No," he lied. "I didn't know."

The Rodians trembled. Maul knew he was going to enjoy his time at Orsis Academy.

Chapter Eight

“I want to go swimming,” said the female Nautolan, whose name was Kilindi Matakō.

Maul did not know why Kilindi was talking to him. He had been at Orsis Academy for almost three years, and the other cadets always kept their distance from him during his recreation hours. He continued dragging his vibroblade along the edge of the long branch he was carving into a spear. But when Kilindi didn’t walk away, he realized she might be expecting a response, so he said, “Then you should go swimming.”

They were in the open courtyard closest to the sea at Orsis Academy, near a gateway to a path that led down to a rocky beach. On the far side of the courtyard, a group of cadets was preparing for the upcoming martial arts competition against a rival military school.

“I thought you might want to come with me,” Kilindi said.

Surprised, Maul cast a sidelong glance at her and said, “Why?”

“I don’t know. I just thought you might. I thought maybe you liked to swim.”

Maul’s jaw tensed as his memory flashed back to Mygeeto, a planet of ice and snow in the Outer Rim Territories. During a break from the Academy, Master Sidious had brought him to Mygeeto to exercise and test his Force powers. They had been

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walking by a lake that was covered by a sheet of dark ice. Even though Maul had worn heavy, insulated clothes, the frigid winds cut like lasers against his skin. He had just completed a series of exercises that had him running up sheer, icy slopes and then coming down as fast as he could. He knew he had performed well, and he'd hoped that his Master might praise him.

Instead, his Master raised a hand and used the Force to lift Maul's small body, tossing him into the middle of the lake.

Maul crashed through the ice and sank, his heavy clothes and boots pulling him down. As the freezing water bit into his face and chilled his blood, he feared he would die. And then his Master's words came to him....*Turn your fear into anger.*

It was easy for Maul to be angry, especially with his Master. The dark side ignited and fueled his anger. He was enraged by the icy water and by the entire planet Mygeeto. He fought his way to the surface, kicking and clawing and bursting through the ice. And after he broke through the ice, while he was still gulping freezing water and struggling to keep his face above the surface, he saw his Master on the shore.

His Master made no move to help him.

Maul's rage was incredible. His fury propelled his arms and legs, made him push through the water, kick his booted feet, and swim to shore. The dark side had set an inner fire to keep him alive, but he quickly realized that same fire did little to keep him warm. He was shivering fiercely as he arrived before his Master.

And even then, his Master did not praise him, but merely continued their walk by the lake, with Maul staggering along at his side, hating the cold, hating the water, hating everything....

"Well," Kilindi said, "I guess I'll see you later." She turned away from Maul and began walking toward the courtyard's gate.

"Wait," Maul said. He switched off his vibroblade and set it down beside the spear he'd been working on. He said, "I like to swim."

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Maul marveled at the way Kilindi moved through the sea, her long head tresses trailing behind her. He thought she was even more graceful in the water than she was on land. Not that he would ever tell her.

He was standing in the sea, not far from the shore, just up to his waist, his bare arms held out stiffly at his sides. Kilindi was swimming about thirty meters beyond him, her strong legs cutting through the water without any obvious effort. He watched her submerge and was surprised when just a few seconds later she broke the surface a meter away from him.

Gazing at Maul with her large, dark eyes, Kilindi said, "Is something wrong?"

"No," Maul said.

"But you said you liked to swim, and you're just standing there."

Maul grimaced. "It's been a long time. Since I've been in water."

"Oh." Kilindi glanced at the shore. "Do you want to go back?"

"No." Maul moved his hands back and forth in the water. "I...I like being here."

Kilindi lowered her body so just her head and shoulders were above water. "I like it here too. There weren't any seas like this where I grew up."

"I don't understand," Maul said. "You are a Nautolan. Your homeworld is Glee Anselm. An ocean planet."

"But I didn't grow up there," Kilindi said flatly. "You knew that, right?"

Maul shook his head. Because he had not grown up on Iridonia or Dathomir, he felt foolish for having assumed Kilindi came from her people's homeworld.

"I thought it was common knowledge," Kilindi said. "I've heard other cadets talking about it, so you were bound to find out. Before I came to the Academy, I was on Orvax Four. I was a slave."

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Although slavery was outlawed on Republic worlds, Maul knew that it existed throughout the galaxy. His mind was suddenly filled with many questions about Kilindi's past, but he said nothing, because he had no reason. He didn't need his Master to tell him that the girl's life should not be of any interest to him. And yet he was interested.

"But all that's behind me now," Kilindi continued as she tilted her head back and looked up at the sky. "My owners are dead."

Without thinking, Maul blurted out, "You killed them?"

Kilindi lowered her head so she faced Maul again. "Yes. They were a large family. I killed them all."

Maul thought, *Good*.

"Killing them was easy, but leaving Orvax was hard. Lots of slavers were hunting me. But Master Trezza heard about the killings and...well, he found me before anyone else did. He's the reason I'm at the Academy. I'm his ward. You knew *that*, right?"

"I knew you were Master Trezza's ward," Maul said. "That's all."

"So now you know about me. What about you? Where are you from?"

Maul looked down and watched the water ripple at his fingertips. "I can't say."

Kilindi tilted her head curiously. "Because you can't say, or because you won't?"

"Both," Maul said, then shook his head. "We can't talk about...me."

Kilindi shrugged, the movement making her head tresses jiggle. "Never mind. I won't ever ask personal questions again. But I do have some advice for you."

Feeling suddenly irritated, Maul said, "Why should I want *your* advice?"

"Because I know why you're making your own wooden spear."

That got Maul's attention. "I'm listening."

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“Master Trezza invited you to go hunting wild kaabores with him and told you it’s a tradition at Orsis Academy for cadets to make their own wooden spears for their first kaabore hunt. But it’s really a test to see if you’re prepared for the unexpected. I’m guessing he’ll lead you straight to a pack of armored chargrecks. That’s what he did to me on my first hunt. See these scars?” Rising so her upper body was above the water’s surface, Kilindi turned to show Maul the three jagged marks across the back of her left shoulder. “A chargreck did that. Your wooden spear will be useless.”

Maul eyed Kilindi suspiciously. “Would Master Trezza be very angry with you for telling me this?”

Kilindi nodded. “Very.”

“Then why? Why tell me?”

Kilindi grinned. “Because I’m hoping you will tell me about the look on Master Trezza’s face when you pass his test.” And then Kilindi sent her body backward, sliding into the water and launching away from Maul. She took care not to splash him as she left.

Maul lowered his body into the water up to his neck, then held his breath and kept his eyes open as he dropped below the surface. He could clearly see Kilindi, illuminated by shafts of sunlight as she undulated past a school of fish. He still hated the waters of Mygeeto, but he decided the sea of Orsis was not entirely unpleasant.

He thought about what Kilindi had told him. He had been looking forward to his hunting expedition with Trezza, but now, even more so.

Four days later, Maul was with Trezza in an outback to the north of Orsis Academy when Trezza pointed to the ground and whispered, “Look there. Kaabore tracks, and they’re fresh. I’m guessing there’s one just beyond those trees.”

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Maul shifted his long spear in his hands as he looked toward the trees. Keeping his voice low, he said, "Shall I try flushing it out, Master Trezza?"

Trezza smiled. "Be my guest."

Holding his spear with one hand, Maul moved past the trees, down a short hill, and around some tall shrubby growths before he saw the five armored chargecks that were waiting for him, just as Kilindi had anticipated. Each chargeck's body was protected by incredibly strong segmented plates lined with sharp spikes.

Maul reached to his belt with his free hand and grabbed a small packet. All the chargecks hissed and lunged at him at the same time. He threw the packet at them as he flipped backward. He was still arcing through the air as the packet exploded open with a quiet pop and deployed a wide electroshock net. The chargecks hit the net and were instantly stunned. They thudded to the ground a split second before Maul landed on his feet.

Maul glanced behind him. No sign of Trezza. He set his spear aside and moved fast. He deactivated the net, which he had taken from the Academy's munitions room, then bunched it into a tight ball and stuffed it between the branches of one shrubby growth. He gathered his spear, then walked back up the hill and past the trees before he found Trezza. Trezza said, "Find anything?"

"No kaabore, Master Trezza," Maul said casually. "Just a few chargecks."

Trezza's reptilian gaze bore into Maul's eyes. "Chargecks? Out here? Are you sure?"

"I think so, Master Trezza. That is, they *looked* like chargecks."

"What happened? Did they run away?"

"Oh, no, Master Trezza." Maul shifted his spear from one hand to the other. "I killed them. I just didn't think anything of it because I was looking for a kaabore."

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Trezza glanced at Maul's spear and then back at the boy's face to see if he was lying. Trezza said, "You killed them? With that spear?"

"No, Master Trezza. I killed them with my hands."

Trezza's nose twitched, and he looked very confused as he said, "You didn't use the Force. I'd have smelled it on you."

"I know you would have, Master Trezza."

Maul could hardly wait to tell Kilindi about how he had used the electroshock net, and also about Trezza's reaction. But he wouldn't tell her what Trezza had said about the Force. He always kept in mind his Master's warning, that no one other than Trezza could know about his powers, because if anyone found out...

The consequences will be most dire.

Chapter Nine

Crouched behind the wide trunk of an ancient tree, Kilindi Matakoto stayed in the tree's shadow as she surveyed the steep, rocky cliff at the edge of the forest. She glanced at Maul, who was hunkered down beside her, and whispered, "Ready?"

Maul nodded. Six years had passed since his arrival on Orsis. Taller and stronger, he still did not know his own age, but based on his observations of similar humanoids, he assumed he was about thirteen years old. Although he was already considered a master of numerous martial arts, he still had difficulty working as part of a team.

Except when he was partnered with Kilindi.

Kilindi moved first, diving away from the tree so she rolled across dead leaves and came to a stop behind another trunk. A sudden burst of blaster fire tore at the ground between the two trees. A second burst pounded into the opposite side of the tree that Kilindi had moved behind. The trajectory of the blaster bolts indicated the shots came from the top of the cliff, about six meters above Kilindi's position. She glanced back to where she'd left Maul, but he had already vanished. She waited.

Barely ten seconds later, Kilindi heard a horrific scream from atop the cliff. A blaster fired, and then another voice wailed across the forest. When the screaming stopped, a third voice

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called out, "Mission accomplished. All clear." The third voice was Maul's.

Kilindi moved around the tree and walked out into the open, heading for the base of the cliff. It took her almost a full minute to scale the wall of rock. As she climbed, she sighted three spherical remotes hovering out of the forest and rising into the air. She knew that the remotes belonged to Master Trezza, and that he used them to track cadets during exercises.

When Kilindi reached the top of the cliff, she found Maul standing a short distance from two fellow cadets, the Rodians Hubnutz and Fretch. The Rodians were clutching at their respective right arms, sitting on the ground beside the shattered pieces of their blaster rifles.

"Thanks a lot, Maul," Hubnutz snorted sarcastically. "Nice of you to only fracture our arms this time."

A repulsorlift engine sounded from overhead, and Kilindi and the Rodians looked up to see Master Trezza's shuttle approaching from Orsis Academy. The three remotes glided up to the shuttle and secured themselves to a rack on the vessel's sensor array.

"Oh, isn't that terrific?" Fretch said. "Now we get to listen to Trezza lecture us on how we messed up."

"Yeah, Maul, you're a real prince," Hubnutz said as the shuttle landed.

Maul ignored the Rodians and the shuttle as he stood at the edge of the cliff, gazing over and beyond the forest canopy, staring in the direction of the distant mountain range that was broken by Blackguard's Gorge, where Sidious had acquired an old fortress to be used as his private retreat during visits to Orsis. With Trezza's permission, Maul was allowed to travel by speeder bike to the fortress, where his Master continued to train him in the ways of the Force and also lightsaber combat.

My Master is there now. Waiting for me.

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Fretch saw Trezza climb out of the shuttle, then angled his snout at Kilindi and added, “Hope you had fun showing off for your pet slave.”

“I’m not a slave!” Kilindi said, her head tresses whipping off her shoulders as she whirled to face Fretch. “And I’m no one’s pet!”

“Good one, Fretch,” Hubnutz said. “You hit a nerve in Maul’s slave.” The two Rodians laughed wheezily. Maul kept staring at the mountains on the horizon.

Kilindi scowled. It was common knowledge that she had served as a slave before she arrived at Orsis Academy. If she had any inclination to respond to the laughing Rodians, she refrained when she saw Trezza walking toward them. Hubnutz and Fretch rose to their feet, grunting from the pain of their injured arms. Kilindi noticed that Maul had not budged, that he was still gazing over the forest. She whispered, “Master Trezza’s here.”

Maul turned and directed his gaze to Trezza, who was carrying a datapad. Trezza came to a stop beside the Rodians, and the four cadets bowed to him. Trezza bowed his head slightly, then said, “Hubnutz and Fretch. You failed to defend the cliff.”

“Maul busted our arms again,” Hubnutz whined.

Trezza frowned with disappointment at the Rodians. “If you can’t defend yourselves against an opponent you already know, how do you ever expect to deal with the unknown? You must be—”

“But Maul’s not like other people!” Fretch protested.

Trezza’s green brow furrowed. “You interrupt me again, young Fretch, and you’ll find yourself in solitary confinement for a week.”

Fretch bowed. “Forgive me, Master Trezza.”

“As I’ve told you too many times before, you must be more mindful. You must learn to think like your enemy, to anticipate every measure with a countermeasure. If you are not prepared for the unknown, the unknown will strike you dead.”

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“Yes, Master Trezza,” the Rodians said in unison.

Turning to Maul and Kilindi, Trezza said, “You are to be commended for your stealth. I confess, I could not keep track of you two. My remotes lost sight of you after you evaded the third patrol in the canyon, before you reached the forest. I know that canyon well. Did you stray into a cave?”

“Yes, Master Trezza,” Kilindi answered.

“Why?”

Kilindi glanced at Maul. Maul said, “Because the remotes were revealing our position to our opponents. Before the exercise, I overheard Hubnutz and Fretch talking. They placed trackers on your remotes.”

“You couldn’t have overheard us,” Fretch said. “Hubnutz and I were alone in the barracks when we talked.” And then Fretch noticed Trezza glaring at him.

Hubnutz said, “It was Fretch’s idea!”

Trezza sneered at the Rodians. “I’ll deal with you two later.” Returning his attention to Maul and Kilindi, he said, “Come with me. We have a very special appointment.” Trezza began walking back to his shuttle.

Special appointment? Maul’s expression remained passive, but his mind raced as he wondered what Trezza wanted with him and Kilindi. He started walking with Kilindi, following Trezza, and was halfway to the shuttle when he said, “I forgot something.” He went back to the Rodians.

Seeing Maul approach, Fretch said, “Thanks for squealing on us.”

“Yeah,” Hubnutz said. “You’re a real pal.”

“Don’t make things worse,” Maul said. “Trezza wants to see us shake hands.”

“Why?”

“He didn’t say.”

As Fretch carefully extended the hand at the end of his fractured arm, he glanced at the shuttle and said, “But Trezza’s not even looking at us.”

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Maul grabbed three of Fretch's long green fingers and twisted them sharply. The noise of rapidly snapping bones made Fretch gasp and Hubnutz cringe. Fretch made a sick gurgling noise.

"Either of you ever call Kilindi a slave again," Maul said, "I'll tear your arms off and feed them to you."

Maul released Fretch's broken fingers and headed back for Trezza's shuttle. He boarded the shuttle and took a seat in the passenger compartment across from Kilindi and Trezza. Trezza was consulting a timetable on his datapad, oblivious to what Maul had just done to Fretch. After the shuttle lifted off, Maul was not at all surprised to see they were headed for Blackguard's Gorge.

Trezza looked up from his datapad and said, "Kilindi, have you met Maul's Master before?"

"No, Master Trezza. But I have seen him on occasion, when he's visited the Academy. May I ask...are we going to his retreat?"

"Indeed, we are." Trezza looked at Maul and said, "I remain astonished that your Master managed to obtain Blackguard's Castle. The previous owner made it clear to everyone in the Orsis system that he had no intention to sell."

If Trezza had asked Maul how his Master had obtained the castle, Maul would have respectfully and truthfully answered that he did not know. Because Trezza's comment had not been a question, Maul remained silent. He knew Kilindi was also wondering why they were traveling to meet with his Master. He glanced at Kilindi, who was peering through a viewport to see the land below.

Snaking between the treacherous cliffs of two snowcapped mountains, Blackguard's Gorge was a long valley that had been named, according to legend, after an ancient space pirate who had used the gorge as his hideout for decades. The only structure in the gorge was Blackguard's Castle, a modest fortress that hugged the shadowy vertical slab of a steep cliff. The castle was essentially invisible to the naked eye, because its rough exterior

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blended in perfectly with the colors and textures of the mountain. Even the landing pad, at a glance, resembled nothing more than a wide shelf of broken rock.

Trezza's shuttle touched down on the landing pad, and a tall, wide rock made a rumbling sound as it traveled on ancient mechanisms, sliding back from the mountain wall to reveal a concealed hangar. Exiting the shuttle, Kilindi was the first to spot Maul's Master. He was standing in the spacious hangar's entrance, holding a walking stick in one hand and wearing the sensor bracket that concealed the upper half of his face.

"Greetings," Sidious said to the group. "Please, come with me. Our guest is waiting inside." He tapped his walking stick across the landing pad, motioning the others to follow him.

Guest? Maul was intrigued. Except for him and occasionally Trezza, Maul was unaware of anyone ever visiting his Master at the castle.

Sidious's cruiser was parked on the far side of the hangar, which also housed a technical station, assorted tools and supplies, and a few empty cargo containers. The walls were solid rock. Sidious grinned impishly as he led Trezza, Kilindi, and Maul to the center of the hangar. Maul had a strange feeling inside the hangar, a feeling he couldn't quite define. *Almost like...we're being watched.*

"You didn't tell them about our guest, did you?" Sidious said to Trezza.

"No," Trezza said, shifting his datapad so he held it behind his back. He looked at Maul and Kilindi. "Recently, the Orsis Academy faculty and I realized we had a problem. A problem concerning you two."

Maul sensed Kilindi was alarmed by Trezza's announcement. He found it hard to understand why she couldn't at least pretend to remain calm.

"Perhaps I should rephrase that," Trezza continued. "The problem was not with you, but with our existing faculty. There was little more that the instructors could teach either of you

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about stealth tactics or hand-to-hand combat techniques, and yet you have two more years ahead of you at the Academy. In short, you require greater challenges than the other cadets. Now, I mentioned this problem to a certain businessman.” Trezza gestured to Maul’s Master, who smiled sheepishly. “Maul, your Master suggested a former instructor who only recently became available again. Your Master also made a generous donation to enable Orsis Academy to secure this instructor. And now, it is my honor to introduce both of you to—”

Sidious cleared his throat loudly. Reaching up to adjust his sensor bracket, he said, “Excuse me, Master Trezza, but I’m very curious about something. I wonder how Maul and Kilindi will react if they meet their new instructor *without* knowing any more details in advance.”

“But of course,” Trezza said. “Why don’t you and I move over beside your cruiser and give these young people some room? May I guide you?”

Sidious tapped his walking stick against the floor and said, “That’s very kind of you, but I *do* know my way around here.”

Leaving Maul and Kilindi at the center of the hangar, Sidious and Trezza went to the cruiser and turned to face the cadets. Sidious leaned close to Trezza and said, “Let me know when anything interesting happens.”

Kilindi said, “I have a bad feeling about this.” And then she gasped and grabbed the back of her neck, her knees buckling. Maul caught her around the waist and pulled her against his body as he launched sideways, carrying her with him. In midair, his right hand swept up Kilindi’s back until his fingers touched a small dart in her left shoulder blade. He hit the floor with the girl on top of him, absorbing the impact as he plucked the dart out from her shoulder. He rolled away from her and was still clutching the dart as he rose to stand, gazing in the direction of the dart’s trajectory.

He saw a figure, a man who wore dark gray body armor and whose head was concealed by a helmet with a distinctive T-visor.

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The armored man held a dart pistol in one hand and had a missile launcher secured to his back.

A Mandalorian.

Maul knew about Mandalorians, whose warrior heritage dated back thousands of years. He also knew that two factions of Mandalorians had battled each other in a long civil war, and that the war had ended recently. And he recalled that his own Master, after their arrival on Orsis six years earlier, had talked with Trezza about a former Academy instructor, a Mandalorian who had once fought Jedi.

Maul was fast enough to see the Mandalorian's incredibly swift approach. He was also fast enough to dodge the first kick that came at his head. But he wasn't fast enough to stop Meltch Krakko's fist from knocking him out cold.

Chapter Ten

Running fast along the volcanic mountain slope on Orsis, Maul gnashed his teeth as another low-energy blaster bolt tore through the thin fabric of his utility suit and slammed into his back. He ignored the pain and kept running.

His pursuers were Meltch Krakko and the two Rodian cadets, Hubnutz and Fretch, and the goal of their exercise was to capture Maul. Krakko and the Rodians were wearing mimetic suits, energy-powered cloaks that allowed for almost perfect camouflage in any environment. Since Krakko's return to Orsis Academy two years ago, he had not only taken a special interest in training the Rodians in tracking and sharpshooting, but also in tormenting the fifteen-year-old Zabrak.

For Maul, the current exercise was merely a warm-up for a bigger challenge on Orsis, an Academy rite of passage called the Gora. Named after the challenge's location, an immense volcanic crater filled with dense forests, vast swamps, and bloodthirsty beasts, the Gora required a cadet to traverse the crater for seven days, surviving without food or equipment except for a single vibroblade. From what Maul had heard, being chased by camouflaged hunters was nothing compared to surviving the Gora.

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Maul approached the rim of the mountain's valley, where glacial water and wind had carved a maze of tall, rocky formations. He darted into the labyrinth, never pausing to catch his breath. More blaster bolts zinged past his body. If his pursuers' blasters had been set to kill, he would have been dead already, a fact that infuriated him. But because Sidious and Trezza had forbidden him from revealing his Force powers to Orsis faculty and cadets, he was obliged to let his pursuers shoot him occasionally. If he'd dodged *every* blaster bolt, they would have had ample reason to suspect he was a Force user.

Without glancing back, he drew his own blaster, which was also set at nonlethal power, and returned fire. He felt his rage increase as he deliberately missed his attackers. Although their mimetic suits rendered Krakko and the Rodians practically invisible, Maul had no difficulty sensing their exact positions behind him. He could have shot each one of them with his eyes closed, but that would have been against the rules that Sidious and Trezza had established. And so he pretended to miss Krakko and the Rodians, let them believe he was an ordinary Zabrak, and sometimes allowed himself to be hit.

A blaster bolt slammed into his calf, and another into his right shoulder. The pain did not slow Maul but he pretended to stumble anyway, all in his ongoing effort to conceal his powers. But as he ran forward, he saw he was heading straight for a deep chasm. Although he was confident that his incredible strength and agility would have enabled him to leap to the other side of the chasm, he knew it would be a mistake to make such a jump with Krakko and the Rodians watching. However, he was also determined to evade his pursuers, to show them that he was more daring than they could ever imagine.

I'll earn their respect.

Maul kept running right up to the chasm's upper ledge, then flung his body into the gap, aiming not for the opposite ledge but for the wall below it. He used the Force to cushion his impact against the wall, then extended his arms to hook his hands over

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an outcropping a few meters below the ledge. With his legs dangling in the air below him, he made every movement look desperate, even though he was not in the least afraid.

He sensed movement above, and knew Krakko and the Rodians were searching for a narrower gap so they could follow him across the chasm. They succeeded less than a minute later, and Maul looked up to see them leaning out over the ledge. He assumed the exercise was over, that they would lower a rope to bring him up.

A rock struck his horned head, and another hit his shoulder. He heard a scuffling noise from above and realized his pursuers were kicking rocks over the rim. As a rock struck the back of one hand that clung to the overhang, he knew he hadn't earned their respect at all.

They're trying to kill me.

Maul was done with restraining his powers, and pretending to be something that he wasn't. Summoning the Force, he launched himself from the overhang and sailed up and out of the chasm. He somersaulted and twisted in midair, flipping his body over the three camouflaged hunters so that he landed on his feet, facing their backs. Startled, Krakko and the Rodians turned fast. Maul had already drawn his blaster and opened fire at them at point-blank range.

Krakko grunted and the Rodians cried out in pain as the blaster bolts hit them. They jumped and rolled away from the chasm's edge, firing back at Maul. For a moment, they moved as if their mimetic suits still gave them an advantage over their prey. Maul used the Force to avoid being hit while he rapidly squeezed and released his blaster's trigger, moving his arm back and forth to aim and fire at each of his cringing targets. He didn't miss once.

Hubnutz and Fretch tried to find protective cover. Maul shot at their legs and continued shooting them after they fell and began screaming. Krakko deactivated his own mimetic suit so he was fully visible. Facing Maul, he shouted, "Stand down!"

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Maul fired at Krakko.

“Stand down!”

Maul pretended he didn’t hear Krakko over the blaster’s report. He felt the blaster start to overheat but kept firing.

And then an amplified voice from above bellowed, “*Cease fire!*”

Maul lowered his blaster as he looked up. He saw an airspeeder approaching. Trezza was behind the airspeeder’s controls. The Falleen’s expression was outraged.

Maul knew Master Sidious would be even less pleased.

“You’re not entirely to blame for what happened,” Sidious said, his face lost in shadow beneath his dark blue cloak.

Maul stood before his Master on the stone floor in the cavernous main hall of the fortress at Blackguard’s Gorge. After Trezza had treated Maul’s wounds and informed him that his Master had already arrived on Orsis to observe the exercises, he had traveled by speeder bike from the academy to the fortress. Because he had been repeatedly told not to reveal his powers, he knew his punishment would be terrible.

“The dark side has taken a serious interest in you,” Sidious continued. “And is gauging if you might be a proper vessel for its power. Seeking expression and loathing restraint, the dark side tests us continually, competing with our will and our need for secrecy.”

“Yes, Master,” Maul said. “I was overcome.”

“*Overcome?*” Sidious’s eyes blazed beneath his cowl.

Maul looked down at the stone-cold floor.

“I said that you weren’t *entirely* to blame,” Sidious said bitterly. “The willingness of the dark side to cooperate in your pitiful demonstration doesn’t exonerate you from breaking your vow to me and from jeopardizing my plans.”

Maul had not wanted to disappoint his Master. He wanted to apologize and ask for forgiveness, but he knew if he did, his punishment would be even worse. And then he thought of how

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long he had suffered on Orsis because he had not been allowed to use his powers, and he felt his shame transform into rage. He looked up at Sidious and was about to speak but his Master made a pinching gesture. Maul felt his throat constrict.

Sidious walked a few steps away from Maul before he released his remote grip on Maul's throat. Looking back at Maul, he continued, "You have called unwanted attention to yourself. The Jedi have been continuing to harass Trezza for creating assassins and proxy armies, so consider what might have happened had a Jedi been present during the exercise. A Jedi would not only have grasped that you are strong in the Force, but that you have received training in the dark arts, endangering *my* position."

Maul felt crushed. He thought of all his years of training, his constant effort to please his Master. He reflected on the exercise that had ended at the chasm, tried to imagine escaping his tormentors *without* using the Force, but he knew his thoughts were pointless. He could not undo his actions.

"Now," Sidious said, "what did you wish to ask me earlier?"

Speaking tentatively, Maul said, "How long must I go on being one thing here and another there? Trained in the Force here, and trained to do without it there? What are your plans for me, Master? What *am* I to you?"

Sidious sniffed. "You are my student, Maul, and one day you may become my apprentice."

Despite all that his Master had taught him, Maul knew practically nothing about Sidious. How had Sidious obtained his wealth or gained so much knowledge of the Force? It was a mystery to Maul. For all he knew, Sidious was a warlord, a sorcerer, a monarch, or even a banished Jedi Master. Maul said flatly, "Your apprentice."

"Perhaps. But if that is meant to be, it will come at the end of many trials that will make these present ones seem insignificant. Removed from the shelter of Orsis, you will begin to understand that the Republic is built on deceit, and that it only survives

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because the Jedi Order wishes it to survive. You will need to be resolute in your allegiance to the dark side of the Force.”

Maul nodded. “I understand, Master.”

“No,” Sidious said. “You only think you do.” From the folds of his dark robe, he produced two lightsabers. He tossed one to Maul, then ignited the weapon that remained in his own hand.

Maul ignited his lightsaber. From the look in his Master’s eyes, he guessed that the burns he was about to sustain would be much more painful than the ones he’d received from Meltch Krakko’s blaster.

He guessed right.

A week later, most of Maul’s wounds had healed as he prepared for the Gora. He was in the Academy barracks, modifying his combat vibroblade’s ultrasonic vibration generator, when Kilindi and another female cadet, Daleen, walked in. Daleen was a dark-haired human, slightly younger than Kilindi, and rumor had it that she was the princess of a royal house.

Kilindi said, “Meltch came looking for you.”

Maul glanced at the doorway. “Where is he now?”

“Up top, I think,” Daleen said.

Maul knew “up top” meant Orsis Orbital Station. He also knew it wasn’t unusual for Meltch Krakko to be there, that the Mandalorian instructor occasionally met with off-worlders at the station. But in the past week, Maul had begun to wonder if Sidious and Trezza had conspired against him, if they had encouraged Krakko to push him beyond his limits, all in an effort to find out whether Maul would break his agreement and use the Force. Now, he wondered if Sidious and Krakko ever crossed paths on Orsis Orbital.

Kilindi said, “Want any tips on what to watch out for in the Gora?”

Maul shook his head as he returned his attention to modifying his vibroblade. “I’ll make do.”

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Kilindi laughed. "That's what *I* said, and look where it got me." Turning around, she shifted her head tentacles to display a relatively recent set of scars that crisscrossed her muscular arms and shoulders. Although bacta treatment would have erased all her scars, Kilindi kept them as proof of her experience.

Grinning at Maul, Daleen said, "Just don't get lost out there." She reached out and gently rubbed the back of his head, careful not to touch his horns. "We're cooking up a surprise for your return."

Kilindi and Daleen walked out of the barracks, leaving Maul wondering what they might be up to. Generally, Maul did not like surprises, as few in his life had been pleasant. But as much as he had been looking forward to the Gora, he now looked forward even more to seeing Kilindi and Daleen when the Gora was over.

The first day of the Gora was beyond intense.

The second day was even more brutal.

The third, fourth, fifth, and sixth days were increasingly bloody. And Maul was having the time of his life.

Countless wild predators kept him constantly occupied as well as sleepless. Except for his heightened senses and physical strength, he did not use the Force in any obvious way. With his vibroblade more often in his hand than in the sheath strapped to his upper leg, he moved like a jungle animal through the forests and grassy swamps that filled the enormous crater, killing some beasts in self-defense, some for food, and others for sheer sport.

Never had he known such freedom. After years of obeying others while containing his rage, he was able to run and hunt and kill as he pleased. By the seventh day, he almost regretted that his journey across the Gora would soon be over.

And then the storm hit. The clouds seemed to roll in from out of nowhere. Within minutes, torrential downpours and hurricane winds hammered at the jungle, turning ground to mud and tearing trees from the ground. The Gora had been dangerous

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enough with bloodthirsty creatures lurking everywhere, and Maul began to wonder if nature itself were trying to kill him.

Scrambling over fallen trees and trudging through flooded swamps, he made his way through a thorn forest to a rustic outpost, his final destination in the Gora. Once he reached the outpost, he could call for an airspeeder to return him to the Academy. He was eager to see Kilindi and Daleen again.

The storm began to die as Maul left the thorn forest and emerged at a broad savannah. He knew the outpost wasn't far, just beyond the grasslands that stretched out before him. But as he began to move across the savannah, he heard footfalls from the forest.

Llian beasts, he determined. Llians were large creatures with spined tails, and although they didn't travel in herds, it sounded as if at least three were heading straight for him. As he drew his vibroblade, he scanned the grasslands, searching for a length of wood so he might quickly improvise a lance. But no such wood or deadfall was in sight.

Four llians burst from the forest, and Maul was surprised to see each beast bore a rider. The riders were slim humanoids dressed in red, hooded garments. Each was armed with an energy bow and pike.

Maul did not recognize the riders, but knew at a glance they were formidable warriors. Although he felt the dark side of the Force swell within him, he did not summon his powers to defend himself. He suspected that Master Sidious had sent the warriors to test his loyalty and commitment.

The llians moved around Maul. Three warriors drew their energy bows and fired glowing arrows at Maul, not to strike him but to drive him back to the fourth mounted warrior who had moved up behind him. Maul dodged the arrows but was knocked backward by an invisible force, and then yanked off his feet so he was suspended upside down in the air a full meter above the ground. The vibroblade fell from his hand.

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Inverted and immobilized, he saw the fourth warrior dismount. From his upside-down perspective, he saw a tall, silver-eyed female with a pale face that was adorned with angular black tattoos. Below her high-peaked red hood, a shieldlike hexagonal medallion appeared to be affixed to her unusually high forehead. A trove of talismans and amulets dangled around her thin neck. As she walked toward Maul, tapered streamers shifted behind her robe, moving like tendrils with a life of their own. “Don’t resist, Nightbrother Maul,” she said. Her voice was deep, with a most unusual accent.

Maul sensed the Force about her. He was certain she was in league with Sidious, possibly an apprentice. Before he could respond, she made a gesture with her hands and then extended one long finger to touch his forehead.

Maul plunged into unconsciousness.

He awoke groggily, feeling drained, as if he had been robbed of the Force. From the noise and vibrations around him, he knew he was inside a small spaceship. Shifting his fingers to his upper leg, he felt the empty sheath to confirm his vibroblade was gone.

He opened his eyes. He was lying on an accelerator chair in the main cabin of a drop ship. Pushing himself up, he saw the woman who had rendered him unconscious. Apparently, the woman and her fellow warriors were so confident in their strength that they had not bothered to cuff or shackle him.

“You are skilled, Maul,” the woman said from her own seat, “but perhaps not as skilled as I was led to believe.”

Maul sneered. “That seems to be the common opinion lately.”

The woman’s eyes widened slightly. “Very revealing. A few moments ago I was thinking that I erred in coming so far and in risking so much to return you to your clan brothers. And yet I sense that you are strong in the Force.”

“I have no brothers,” Maul said sharply, as if he found the word distasteful.

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“Ah, but you do. And once among them your life will be very different. On Dathomir, you will be nurtured and trained as the Winged Goddess and the Fanged God meant you to be trained. When the time is right you will face the Nightbrothers’ equivalents of the Tests of Fury, Night, and Elevation. And should you pass those trials, you may be fortunate enough to be transformed into an extraordinary warrior. Your strength will be enhanced tenfold, and those puny horns that stipple your head presently will become long and lethal.”

Maul had stopped listening as soon as she’d mentioned Dathomir. Sidious had told him about the Nightsisters, the Force-using witches who ruled that world. He thought of his most recent meeting with his Master, a week prior to the Gora, when Sidious had cautioned him that “beings of all nature” would attempt to deceive him, to fill his head with lies. There was no question in his mind that the witch who had captured him was associated with Sidious, that she was either deliberately or unwittingly testing Maul. He refused to become a pawn in their game.

“I won’t be going to Dathomir.”

The witch raised an eyebrow. “You’ve no interest in seeing your birth world or meeting the members of your Nightbrother clan?”

“Neither.”

The witch frowned. “You are fated to serve us, Maul, one way or the other. It has always been thus.”

Staring hard at the witch, Maul said, “I serve only one Master.”

The witch smiled without mirth. “The Falleen you answer to will have to find another.”

The Falleen? Maul was confused. Was she under the impression that Trezza was his only Master, or was she toying with him? He considered mentioning Sidious by name, but decided against it.

A red-garbed Nightsister stepped into the cabin. She was armed with an energy bow and a sheathed energy sword, a fixed-

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blade weapon that resembled a glowing lightsaber. Maul recognized the Nightsister as one of the warriors who'd attacked him in the Gora. Like the seated witch, she had pale white skin and a tattooed face, but Maul noticed she was younger and did not have such a high forehead. The Nightsister said, "Mother Talzin, we are approaching the station."

Talzin nodded but kept her eyes on Maul. "Can I trust you to behave while we transfer to our vessel, or do you wish simply to awaken aboard it?"

Maul glanced at the young Nightsister's weapons. "For the moment, you have the upper hand. I won't make trouble."

"Of course you won't," Talzin said soothingly.

Maul looked out a viewport and saw they were approaching Orsis Orbital Station. A moment later, the drop ship shuddered as a tractor beam locked onto it. As the tractor beam eased the ship into one of the station's docking bays, Maul considered his limited options.

He knew that the station's cargo and passenger hubs were linked at several points by air lock corridors. If he could break away from the Nightsisters and get to another ship, he might be able to return to Orsis before anyone at the Academy realized he had left the Gora. He would prove to Sidious that he would not be taken so easily.

The drop ship touched down in the space station's large, dimly illuminated cargo bay. As Maul walked with Talzin and the three Nightsisters down the drop ship's boarding ramp, he was struck by a sudden feeling of apprehension. Talzin must have sensed something as well, because she turned to look at him, as if he might be the cause of her concern.

Maul said, "Trouble."

Chapter Eleven

Sensing he was being watched by hidden life-forms, Maul scanned the shadowy corners of the high-walled cargo bay. Without any prompting from Talzin, the three Nightsisters drew their swords and enabled their energy bows. Talzin stepped away from her group, moving out into the middle of the cargo bay as if she were not worried in the least.

“Stay right where you are and lower your weapons,” a gruff voice barked from the cargo bay loudspeakers. And then the life-forms emerged from shadows. Leathery-skinned Weequays stood amongst large-headed Siniteens, all armed with blaster rifles that were leveled at Maul and the Nightsisters.

A towering figure clad from head to foot in garish battle armor moved to the center of the cutthroats. He was a Vollick, a native of Rattatak, an Outer Rim world infamous for its gladiatorial death matches. A remarkably large blaster was holstered to his hip. Each of his arms looked as if they weighed more than Maul’s body.

“You won’t be returning to Dathomir, Mother Talzin,” the Vollick said. “The five of you are going to be my guests on Rattatak, where you will eventually become members of my elite army.” He drew his enormous blaster from its holster and fired a

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shot at the bay's tall ceiling. "Our weapons are set on stun, but we'll shoot to kill if you decide to refuse my invitation."

Maul wondered how the Vollick warlord and his soldiers had known Talzin would be arriving on the space station, and then he wondered if the Vollick might be Talzin's accomplice. Talzin said nothing. She raised her hands as if in surrender, then extended her fingers.

Maul was surprised to see dozens of Nightsister warriors materialize from the sidewalls and upper levels of the docking bay. However, he instantly sensed they were insubstantial, that the new arrivals were nothing more than a powerful Force illusion created by Talzin. The warlord and his soldiers fell for it. They rapidly reset their blasters' selector switches from stun to full power, angled their weapons away from Talzin, and opened fire at the apparitions. Genuine blaster bolts and illusory arrows began crisscrossing the bay.

The real Nightsisters drew their energy bows and began launching very real arrows at the Weequays and Siniteens. They dropped several soldiers before Talzin's conjured illusion evaporated unexpectedly. Maul glanced at Talzin, saw her frustrated expression, and wondered if she had complete control of her powers.

"Cease fire!" yelled the startled Vollick. "Cease fire!" But his men ignored him and turned their weapons on the genuine Nightsisters who remained in the bay. As Maul ducked for cover, he saw a Weequay blast one of the Nightsisters at the same moment that a Siniteen fired a shot that tore through Talzin's thigh. The Nightsister dropped her energy bow as she collapsed. Talzin stumbled and fell on the deck several meters away from Maul.

Maul considered running back into the drop ship, but he doubted that it had sufficient power to escape the bay's tractor beam array. And looking at Talzin sprawled on the deck, he also began to wonder whether Sidious wanted her dead. He thought, *If this is a test, it's for keeps.*

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He ran toward the fallen Nightsister, leaping and tumbling across the deck until he reached her energy bow. He didn't have to look at her to know she was dead. Snatching up her weapon, he darted back to the drop ship, took cover behind one of the landing struts, and began firing back at the warlord's men. Talzin was still lying on the deck. The two remaining Nightsisters had moved beside her and were unleashing a barrage of arrows at their opponents.

Maul scanned the cargo bay. Recalling the space station's layout from previous visits, he visualized the shortest route to a neighboring bay where he hoped to find another drop ship. He was still working with his rough plan to return to Orsis before anyone discovered he was missing. Although he would have accomplished this goal more easily if he used the Force, he did not want to disappoint his Master again. He was about to make a break for the nearest hatchway when he heard Talzin call out, "Don't leave us, Maul!"

Talzin was on her feet, supported by one of the Nightsisters while the other was covering them. Blaster bolts whizzed past them. Talzin cried, "Maul!"

Maul didn't know what to do. Would Sidious expect him to show sympathy? Was Talzin even one of Sidious's agents? Either way, how would he better serve the dark side of the Force? By helping the Nightsisters, or leaving them to die?

Maul cursed through his gritted teeth. He hooked the energy bow over his right shoulder, then ran through a hail of blaster bolts to reach Talzin. He heaved her up from the deck, flung her over his left shoulder, and raced for the entrance of a cylindrical corridor that led to the safety of an adjacent bay. The two Nightsisters followed, firing arrows at the warlord and his soldiers behind them as they moved after Maul.

Maul was fifty meters shy of the connector's entrance when a hail of blaster bolts cut him off. He carried Talzin behind a large cargo container for cover, then propped her up on the deck beside the container. The other two Nightsisters arrived,

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positioned their bodies to protect Talzin, and returned fire. Maul looked at Talzin.

“Our magicks don’t work in this sterile place,” Talzin said bitterly as blaster bolts ricocheted off the container. “That’s why I could not sustain the illusion.”

“The illusion that nearly got all of us killed,” Maul said.

Talzin winced as she moved her hand over the deep wound in her outer thigh. “On Dathomir, I would be able to heal myself.”

“No one asked you to come here,” Maul said, but then thought maybe she had responded to an invitation from Sidious.

“We came for your sake.”

“That’s a lie.”

Talzin’s silver eyes flared. “You fail to grasp that you belong to a great heritage, Maul. That you were spirited away from Dathomir doesn’t alter the fact that you are a Nightbrother, and that your fate is joined with ours.”

Maul snorted. “Everyone has a plan for me.”

Talzin’s brow furrowed, then she said, “I don’t understand.”

Maul ignored her as he tried to find a way out. Looking to the area between the cargo container and the soldiers, he saw a dozen automated load-lifter droids. Apparently oblivious to the firefight, the simple-minded droids were hauling similar cargo containers to different areas of the bay. The containers were drifting slowly into the bay on powerful tractor beams from a cargo ship that was too large to be berthed inside the station. Maul knew enough about starship technology to know that a computer housed in the bay’s upper-level control room was guiding the droids and tractor beams. Looking up, he found the control room’s window.

“We’ve one chance to make it through the connector and into the passenger pod,” Maul said. He looked at Talzin. “I’m going to need one of your energy swords.”

“You’ve no training in the use of that weapon,” said Talzin.

Maul shrugged the energy bow from his shoulder. “I’ll just have to improvise.”

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Talzin grabbed an energy sword from one of the Nightsisters and handed it to Maul. Taking the sword, he leaped away from the cargo container, hit the deck, and then sprinted for the control room's bulkhead.

The soldiers turned their weapons and fired at Maul. Gripping the energy sword with both hands, he sprang from the deck, launching himself up toward the control room. He plunged the sword through the control room's window, creating a vertical hole, then flipped his body to kick the window and shatter it. As he landed inside the control room, the soldiers fired more blaster bolts after him, and the bolts ricocheted off the room's walls. One stray bolt grazed the side of Maul's upper right arm, drawing blood.

Ignoring the pain, Maul dropped to the control room's floor until he reached the main control board. His education at Orsis Academy had included learning how to override computers, and he quickly reprogrammed the cargo bay's tractor beam array.

Almost instantly, the cargo containers that had been drifting slowly into the bay were suddenly soaring in at rapid speed. Although the increased speed had no effect on the cargo ship parked outside the space station, the containers began piling up inside the bay faster than the load-lifter droids could catch them. The pile quickly accumulated into a wall of containers that separated the soldiers from the Nightsisters, but left the Nightsisters with a clear passage to the connector that led to the space station's passenger hub.

Rising from the control room's floor, Maul glanced down to see several soldiers trying to run to the far side of the bay before the incoming containers cut them off. The containers moved faster than the soldiers could run, and they were crushed. The remaining soldiers retreated.

Maul jumped down from the control room and returned to Talzin and the two Nightsisters. He wrapped his arm around Talzin's waist and helped her to her feet. The Nightsisters followed Maul and Talzin into the air lock corridor.

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With the Nightsisters bringing up the rear, the two of them hurried to the entrance of the cylindrical corridor. Maul saw the entrance's sealed hatch, but because he didn't want to lose his hold on Talzin, he used the Force to open the hatch. After they all moved through the hatch and into the corridor's first airlock, Talzin used the Force to seal the hatch behind them, and the pair of Nightsisters launched their energy quarrels to destroy the hatch's control panel. An alarm began blaring. Maul ignored it and kept moving.

Working as a team, they repeated their actions as they moved through several more hatches until they reached the station's passenger hub. Maul wasn't sure what Sidious would think of his use of the Force, but as they moved into the passenger hub, he became absolutely certain that his Master was testing him. He was so certain that he stopped in his tracks.

"Why are you waiting?" Talzin said. "Our ship isn't that far."

"You can stop pretending," Maul said.

Apparently confused, Talzin shook her head. "About what?"

"About Dathomir, the Nightbrothers, and the rest. I know that you were sent by my Master. I know, because I sense him. My Master is here."

Moving through a maintenance level to avoid more soldiers, Maul, Talzin, and the Nightsisters finally arrived in the hangar that housed Talzin's starship. Maul had expected to find the warlord's soldiers stationed in the hangar to prevent Talzin from reaching her ship, but he had not expected to find over a dozen Weequays lying dead on the hangar's deck.

Although none of the Weequay bodies bore obvious wounds, Maul knew how they had died, and also the identity of their killer. Leaving Talzin standing with her Nightsisters, he moved across the hangar to face a dark alcove. He stopped, dropped to one knee, and bowed his head.

"Master."

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Sidious stepped out from the alcove. He wore his dark robe, and his face was concealed by the shadows beneath his deep hood.

Talzin and the Nightsisters fell back a step. Evidently, they could sense the man's power in the dark side of the Force. As the Nightsisters kept their energy bows aimed at the deck, Sidious turned slightly toward them, gestured to Maul, and said, "This one does not belong to Dathomir. He is mine."

Talzin said, "Then you didn't merely abandon him to the Falleen."

"On the contrary," Sidious said.

Talzin glanced at Maul. "You have trained him well."

Sidious motioned to Talzin's ship. "You'll find the body of your fallen Nightsister aboard."

Talzin nodded her head in gratitude. Sidious folded his hands into the opposite sleeves of his robe and said, "Now, be gone from here before I have a change of mind."

Talzin was unaccustomed to taking orders, but she gestured to the Nightsisters to board the ship. The Nightsisters walked past Maul, who was still kneeling with his head lowered. As Talzin limped past Maul, she casually allowed her dangling left hand to brush the bloody wound that had been opened in his upper right arm. She proceeded up the boarding ramp. Neither Maul nor Sidious noticed her move her left hand to one of the talismans that dangled from her neck, and press Maul's blood upon the talisman before she entered her ship.

Talzin's ship lifted from the deck and glided out of the hangar. Sidious moved to an observation window that overlooked Orsis. Maul followed obediently, then dropped to a kneeling posture and waited for his Master to speak.

Staring out the window, Sidious said at last, "You did well, Maul. It pleases me that you showed restraint and betrayed none of your training in the dark side of the Force."

Maul bowed his head. "I did so in the hope of one day becoming your apprentice."

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Sidious glanced back at Maul. "Then consider yourself one step closer."

"Thank you, Master."

Sidious stepped away from the window. "The time has come for you to learn certain things about the nature of our undertaking. As I told you, I have been putting into motion the stages of a Grand Plan, a plan you may play a part in if you can continue to demonstrate worthiness and loyalty. You should know, though, that this plan has in fact been in the making for a millennium. It springs from the minds of many who serve a great tradition." He paused to look at Maul. "A tradition of far greater import than the Dathomiri brotherhood Talzin surely told you about. It is the tradition of the ancient order known as the Sith."

Surprised, Maul narrowed his eyes. "You told me of the Sith when I was young, Master."

"What I kept from you then is that I am the Sith Lord, *Darth* Sidious. My Master both named and conferred the title on me, and at my discretion, you may one day be afforded the same honor by me."

Maul swallowed hard. "I will strive to prove my worth to you, Master."

"Yes, you will," Sidious said. "From this point on I will begin to tutor you in the ways of the Sith. We are opponents of the Republic, and the sworn enemies of the Jedi Order. It will be our task to see the former brought down and the latter expunged from the galaxy. Where I will remain the guiding hand in this, it will fall to you to execute missions that could pose a risk to my position should the true purpose of our acts be discovered."

For years, Maul had wondered the purpose of all his training. Now he knew. His heart pounded.

"Nothing less than perfection will be sufficient, Maul," Sidious said. "Do you understand?"

Maul bowed his head again. "I understand, Master."

"Then let's put that to the test, shall we?"

Maul looked up. "Another?"

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Sidious's brow furrowed. "Another?"

"As you engineered with Mother Talzin?"

Sidious grinned faintly. "What happened on Orsis and aboard this station was not set in motion by my hand, Maul. In fact, you were betrayed by one who told Talzin where to find you, and then aided and abetted her plan to capture you."

Maul's eyes widened with surprise, and then he felt a wave of anger. "May I know the identity of my betrayer, Master?"

Sidious looked at the ceiling for a moment as he considered Maul's request, then replied, "Meltch Krakko."

Krakko?! Maul scowled, wondering how long the Mandalorian had been plotting against him. "Did Trezza know, Master?"

Sidious shook his head. "Trezza knew nothing. However, I fear that we may not be able to contain the damage that has been done. We can't risk that word of your disappearance and all that followed may spread." He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "I will deal with the Vollick warlord. But it will be your task to deal with Trezza and the others at the school."

The others? Maul thought of Trezza, who had always treated him with a degree of respect that Sidious never had. He thought of Kilindi and Daleen, who had shown him kindness. And then his pounding heart turned to stone and he said, "I live to do your bidding, Master."

Sidious nodded. "And as long as you do, you will continue to live."

Maul rose.

"Be discreet," Sidious said.

Leaving the space station, Maul traveled by drop ship back down to Orsis. On his way, he visualized what he had to do. He knew the layout for every building at the Academy, knew every entrance and exit. He thought of all the things he hated about the place, especially the rules that forbade him from using the Force.

Night had long fallen by the time he reached the Academy's perimeter, and he felt very different from the cadet he had been

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when he left to begin the Gora. Now, his education seemed ages behind him. He felt he was one with the dark side of the Force.

He moved quickly and quietly through the courtyards and buildings. First, he killed the Academy's sentries, and then the security guards posted outside the training rooms and barracks. He used the Force when it was most efficient, and his bare hands whenever it pleased him. Knowing that most of the cadets would already be asleep in the barracks, he went noiselessly from one darkened room to the next, leaving a trail of death.

He entered the room shared by Kilindi and Daleen. Kilindi's bunk was empty. Daleen's wasn't. Daleen was snoring lightly. A moment later, her life had ended, and Maul was moving out the door. He took no comfort from Kilindi's absence. He knew he would find her.

When he arrived upon the sleeping forms of the Rodians Hubnutz and Fretch, he woke them before he broke their necks.

Not every cadet was sleeping. Maul found a group of older cadets practicing martial arts in a training room. He locked the doors, switched off the lights, and moved through the group like a furious beast of prey.

Covered in blood, he proceeded to the building where the instructors had their own quarters.

Approaching the door to Trezza's office, he heard voices inside. He recognized the voices. Kilindi and Trezza. Kilindi was demanding that Trezza explain why Maul had not returned from the Gora. She sounded worried and angry. But as far as Maul was concerned, she was talking about someone else, someone he didn't know.

Maul opened the door and stepped into the office. Trezza was seated behind his massive desk. Kilindi stood before him. And Meltch Krakko stood on the far side of the room, near an open fireplace.

Kilindi gasped at the sight of Maul's blood-soaked body. Maul fixed his gaze on Krakko and walked straight toward him. Even though Maul was not carrying any weapons, Krakko drew his

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blaster and fired at him. Maul jerked his body to the left, dodged the blaster bolt, and kept walking toward Krakko. Krakko fired two more shots. Maul dodged those too before he grabbed Krakko's gun arm with one hand, and his neck with the other. Krakko sputtered angrily. What Maul did next made Trezza gasp and Kilindi cover her mouth with her hands.

Maul kept his eyes on Trezza as he hurled Krakko's lifeless body into the fireplace. Trezza raised his hands to show he wasn't holding any weapons and said, "Maul, please calm yourself. We can talk about this." Keeping his hands raised, he looked anxiously at Kilindi.

Maul sensed Trezza's anxiety and knew Trezza was just trying to stall and distract him. He was not surprised to see the flat metal knife pop out of Trezza's sleeve.

Catching the knife between his fingers, Trezza threw it at Maul. Maul's left hand flew in front of him to catch the knife by its handle, then whipped it back with blinding speed at Trezza's upper chest. Trezza gasped, clutched at his chest, and collapsed upon his desk.

Maul looked at Kilindi. She was staring at him blankly, but she radiated fear like a child in the presence of an enormous monster. Maul walked toward her. He never paused to wonder how his life might have been different if he had not revealed his Force powers to Meltch Krakko. He never paused at all. His only purpose was to serve his Master.

Kilindi didn't run. She did try to smile. She said, "I guess you're not interested in the surprise that Daleen and I had for you."

"Not anymore," Maul said.

Soon after the destruction of Orsis Academy, Maul learned why Sidious had been so protective of his own identity for so many years. Evidently, Sidious had long maintained another identity as a public figure, a Senator from the planet Naboo. In his Senatorial guise on the planet Coruscant and other worlds

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throughout the Galactic Republic, Sidious was known as Palpatine. Most people who knew Palpatine regarded him as a polite, quiet man, as modest as he was harmless.

Maul moved with Sidious to Coruscant, where Sidious had long kept a secret lair in a skyscraper in an industrial area. Maul spent the next two years carrying out a series of secret missions for his Master. The missions were conceived to help Sidious gain power without others ever knowing of his existence. By the end of those two years, Maul had repeatedly proven that he was as strong as he was fast, and that he would never break. He also sensed that his control of the darkness that fueled the Force was close to perfect.

Chapter Twelve

Sidious and Maul returned to Mustafar. For fourteen days, Sidious put Maul through a series of grueling physical tests. Maul defended himself against lightsaber-wielding droids in the training room. Blindfolded, he threw daggers at robotic targets, which threw the daggers back at him. He was blindfolded again before he climbed into a starship flight simulator wired with disciplinary electrodes. He wore a sensory-deprivation suit when he ran through a maze that was lined with razor-edged walls, and also when he was deposited into a previously unexplored Mustafarian cave. In locked chambers, he was exposed to extreme temperatures and deprived of food. For each test, he drew strength from the dark side of the Force.

When the fourteen days were over, Maul was exhausted. His entire body ached as he stood before Sidious in the meeting room. Not only had he passed every test, he had destroyed every test. However, his Master always expected more from him, so he was not entirely surprised when Sidious said, "Because you have survived the preliminaries, you may proceed to the actual test to become a Sith Lord."

Maul willed his body to remain standing.

"I am sending you to a planet in the Outer Rim," Sidious continued. "It is made up of three kinds of terrain. Desert,

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swamp, and mountains. You will have at least three matches on each terrain. I have sent a fleet of assassin droids to attack you. Each is programmed with different strategies. Some will work together. Some will work alone. They are all programmed to kill.”

Maul turned to face his Master. Although Maul remained silent, the fire in his eyes betrayed his surprise. And his excitement.

Sidious noticed Maul’s reaction. “That is correct. I am prepared to lose what I most value. So must you be to become a Sith. You must be prepared to lose your own life in order to win.”

Maul nodded. “I understand, my Master.”

“You will have to survive for a month,” Sidious added. “You will have only a survival pack.”

Despite his exhaustion, Maul felt exhilarated. He was determined to prove he was the best apprentice in the history of the Sith.

Sidious did not accompany Maul in the droid-piloted cruiser that left Mustafar, nor did he inform Maul of the cruiser’s destination. But while the cruiser was traveling through hyperspace, Maul tapped at a keypad at the navigation console until he accessed and bypassed the coded coordinates that identified his destination as Hypori, a planet in the Ferra sector of the Outer Rim Territories. He had never been to Hypori before, but he had not expected his Master to send him to a familiar world.

The droid pilot emerged from the cockpit and noticed Maul examining a scope at the navigation console. The droid said, “I don’t think Master Sidious will be pleased to know that you accessed restricted data from the navicomputer.”

Without looking away from the scope, Maul replied, “When Master Sidious learns that you used dated encryption codes for the destination coordinates, he’ll feed you through a shredder for a full week.”

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“Oh,” said the droid pilot. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to erase my memory of the past minute.”

Good idea, Maul thought as the droid returned to the cockpit. But then it occurred to him that the droid pilot might actually be an assassin droid. He could only imagine how many assassin droids were already waiting for him on Hypori, and it was possible that the pilot droid would deliver him straight into a massive ambush.

The cruiser dropped out of hyperspace to arrive within view of Hypori. It was a small world, and scattered clouds were visible in the upper atmosphere. Even from space, Maul could make out some wide areas of desert, small oceans, and shadowy mountain ranges, which were consistent with Sidious’s description of the varied terrain.

The cruiser descended through the planet’s atmosphere. Maul grabbed the survival pack that Sidious had given to him and strapped it to his back. He leaned into the cockpit, looked through the window, and saw they were angling down over a body of water, heading toward a rocky beach.

The droid swiveled its mechanical eyes to face Maul and said, “Please don’t ask me where we’re going to land. I’m not authorized to tell you.”

Ignoring the droid, Maul examined the ship’s readouts for flight speed and altitude, then cast a final glance through the window, noting the distance to the beach, before he pulled out of the cockpit. As he mentally calculated the cruiser’s approach to the beach, he dropped to a crouch beside the main hatch, wrapped one arm tightly around his legs so his knees were clasped against his chest, and used his free hand to hit the lever for the emergency exit.

The hatch exploded open. Maul kept his head pressed against his knees as he sailed out of the cruiser, fifty-five meters above sea level. He tumbled through the air, the cruiser’s engines whining away from him as it veered across the sky. Automatically recalculating his descent, he twisted at the waist before he

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straightened and extended his legs skyward. His fists braced before him, he knifed into the water.

The water was cold. Holding his breath, Maul made sure the survival pack was still secured against his back, then began swimming to shore, staying below the water's surface. He suspected the droid pilot would tell Sidious about his leap from the cruiser, but that did not concern him. His test required that he survive for a month on Hypori. Sidious had never told him to remain on the cruiser until it landed.

When Maul neared the shore, he broke the surface with his mouth and nose but kept his body underwater. He reached out with his senses. He could not detect any movement on the rocky beach, but he knew it was only a matter of time before the assassin droids found him.

And then they found him.

The assassin droids were relentless. Programmed to fight to the death, they had blasters built into their chests and hands. No matter how hard Maul tried to conceal himself or his desperately improvised camps, the droids found him. They never slept, never allowed Maul to sleep for very long, never hesitated before they pounced. When Maul did manage to rest and recover, he fell asleep *knowing* he would be awakened by an attack.

The droids drove him into the frozen mountains and across the burning deserts. Maul's survival pack was torn from his back and lost in one battle. And after twenty days, Maul realized he was at risk of losing something else. His mind.

Because the attacks never stopped.

Maul was beyond paranoid. He had reason to believe that every sound, every shape, and every shadow on Hypori was a potential threat.

He grew thin and his strength began to ebb. He foraged for food when he could. Life was scarce on Hypori, but he found a few small animals, killed them, and ate them raw, because he dared not risk building a fire that would attract more droids.

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It was while he was trying to eat a tough-skinned lizard at the base of a cliff that two droids attacked. Maul defeated both droids but sustained a blaster wound to his thigh. Limping into a ravine, he found a large cave and hauled his body into it. Maul knew he had to recover before he could fight again. But without his survival pack, he had no healing bacta or bandages.

The wound festered. The pain was blinding. He listened for approaching droids but heard none. The days blurred, but Maul was almost certain that a full month had passed since he had arrived on Hypori. As he fell into and out of restless sleep, Maul began to wonder if his Master had forgotten him.

His wound became worse. The pain was beyond excruciating. He had no doubt that death would come soon. He thought he was hallucinating when he saw a cloaked figure appear at the mouth of the cave.

It was Sidious.

Maul could not believe his eyes. He felt not only relieved to see his Master, but genuinely glad. His Master would help him.

Sidious moved into the cave. He came to a stop near Maul. Smiling as he looked down at his apprentice, he said, "Now it is time for your final battle."

Maul wondered if he had heard correctly. He knew his Master must have been able to see plainly that he was not fit to stand. And yet he also knew his Master never tolerated weakness of any kind. Maul scrambled at the cave's walls and pulled himself up. His balance was off. Searing pain shot through his leg as he lurched forward.

Sidious handed Maul a lightsaber. Maul fumbled with the weapon and activated it. The cave's walls shimmered with light.

Maul did not realize how parched his throat was until he rasped, "Where is the assassin droid, Master?"

Stepping back from Maul, Sidious drew his own lightsaber and ignited its red blade. "I will be your opponent."

Maul stared at his Master with disbelief. And then his disbelief changed to anger. He summoned up the dark side of the Force.

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He felt a burning sensation flicker and grow within him, a trickle of strength. He took a step toward his Master.

Sidious sneered. "You cannot be as pathetic as you look." He raised his lightsaber and attacked.

Maul parried the blow and reversed, coming at Sidious from the opposite side. But Sidious had already vanished, leaving Maul to lunge at empty air. As Maul lost his balance, his body fell against the cave's wall.

Sidious said from behind Maul, "You *are* that pathetic. You are weak. Not worthy of being a Sith Lord. I have misjudged you."

Maul's anger turned to rage. He spun fast and swung his lightsaber again, but again he failed to strike Sidious, who moved faster than he could follow. He fell against the opposite wall and gasped for breath.

Sidious howled with laughter. "I expected your failure. I saw your weaknesses long ago. Your doubts in your own abilities. Your *lack of faith* in my teaching. Your *inability* to embrace the dark side. And that is why, over these long years, I have secretly trained another apprentice."

Maul stared hard at Sidious.

"Oh, poor Maul. All he ever wanted was a friend. Does it please you to know I have another apprentice? Does it make you feel less alone?"

Still trying to catch his breath, Maul said, "More than one apprentice...is against the rules of the Sith."

"You are right," Sidious said with a grin. "A spark of intelligence, at last." He gestured to the mouth of the cave. "My second apprentice is on the other side of the planet. He conquered all the assassin droids sent after him. He only sustained a flesh wound. He is healthy. He is strong. Unlike the pathetic weakling I see before me."

Maul realized his opponents had not really been the assassin droids. He thought of all the punishment he had endured over the past month, and then of the unending punishments of his

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entire life. He thought of his true opponent, the unseen adversary, chosen by Sidious to become a Sith Lord. Maul felt robbed of his past and future. And then a rage unlike anything he had ever felt before swelled through him. The rage was so overwhelming that he thought it might consume him.

No. I can direct it. My rage will consume my enemy. It will consume my Master. Glaring at Sidious, Maul saw the true face of his enemy.

Sidious snickered. "Can you understand? Focus. If there can be only one apprentice, then one of you must die. Who do you think I have chosen to die, Maul?"

Maul felt his rage flowing through his veins, pumping energy into every muscle. He felt so powerful that he believed he could accomplish anything. And more than anything else, he wanted his Master's blood.

Maul sprang at Sidious. Sidious barely missed the first blow from Maul's lightsaber, an upward swing that aimed to rip Sidious in half. Maul swung again but Sidious deflected the blow and retreated. As Maul moved across the rough cave floor, sweat stung his eyes, but he did not stumble. He somersaulted through the air, his lightsaber whirling in the darkness. Sidious raised his lightsaber to parry the next blow, which was so powerful it made him stagger backward. As Maul struck again, he thought, *I'm going to kill him.*

Sidious parried every blow, but Maul could tell his Master was working hard to keep him at bay. As Sidious backed up against the wall, he said, "You want to kill me? You want to kill your Master?"

"Yes," Maul grunted.

"You hate me?"

"Yes!" Maul screamed through clenched teeth.

Sidious shifted like a liquid shadow, maneuvering around his apprentice. Maul was suddenly up against the wall, gasping for breath as his vision blurred. His strength was evaporating. He turned fast to see Sidious. Sidious lashed out with his lightsaber.

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Maul parried the blow, but then his lightsaber suddenly flew from his hand.

As Maul heard his lightsaber deactivate and clatter across the cave's floor, Sidious raised his own lightsaber and advanced. Maul knew he was about to die, but he did not cringe. As Sidious swung his lightsaber, Maul leaped forward, grabbed Sidious's wrist, and sank his teeth into his hand. Maul tasted blood and spat it back at Sidious.

Sidious brought the lightsaber down on Maul. Maul waited for the pain and the shock of death.

He was surprised when the lightsaber's blade bounced off his shoulder.

Sidious cackled merrily. He stood and looked at Maul. Then he tossed the lightsaber aside. Maul realized his Master had been using a harmless training saber.

Maul leaned back against the cave wall. The rock bit into his back but he concentrated on the pain while his Master continued to laugh without mercy. When Sidious was done, he faced Maul and said, "Do you feel the hate?"

Maul nodded.

"Good. It is the source of your strength. You still hate me. No matter. Today you have delivered yourself into my hands. I have the power of life or death over you, Maul. Someday you will hold that power over another. It is the honor of the Sith. You will devote yourself to the idea of domination."

"But...what about the other apprentice?"

"There is no other apprentice."

Maul was astonished. He didn't know what to say.

"You have passed the test."

Maul could still taste his Master's blood on his lips, but his rage was rapidly ebbing. He shifted his feet and realized he was standing on his lost lightsaber. He picked it up and shoved it into his belt.

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"From this day forward," Sidious said, "you are a Sith Lord. You have chosen a path of darkness, the path of power. You are Lord Maul. You are my instrument."

"Yes, Master."

Sidious smiled proudly. "Your rage. You enjoyed it? You enjoyed wanting to kill me?"

"I took pleasure in it."

Sidious laughed again, but it was not a mocking laughter. "You will do well, Lord Maul."

Maul realized he no longer felt any anger toward Sidious. He felt only...loyalty.

Sidious and Maul returned to Coruscant, where a medical droid tended to Maul's injuries. Maul had felt drained by his trials on Hypori, but within several days, he felt stronger than ever before. Now that he was a Sith Lord, he was empowered by a sense of purpose.

He was fully recovered when Sidious summoned him to his private library. He found Sidious examining an ancient pyramidal holocron. Maul knew from his studies that the holocron was a Sith artifact, used to preserve data.

Sidious glanced at his apprentice. "You are a formidable warrior, Lord Maul. Now you need a weapon to match. I have spent many hours perusing the Sith archives, and I believe I have found something appropriate for your fighting skills." He brushed his fingers along one edge of the holocron, and a moment later, the holocron projected a hologram of a double-ended lightsaber.

Maul stared at the hologram, fascinated by the weapon's appearance. Imagining the damage it would inflict, he suddenly felt eager to wield such a lightsaber.

"This will be your weapon, Lord Maul. In order to serve me well, you must be invincible." Pointing to the hologram, he continued, "You must build the lightsaber yourself so that you know it intimately. It will be fitted for your hand, balanced for

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your stroke. You shall train with it until it is a part of you. And then you shall join me on the greatest mission of all.”

“What is that, Master?”

“The domination of the entire galaxy.”

Chapter Thirteen

Maul was exercising in his training room on Coruscant and had just completed a triple backward flip when he heard the signal on his comlink. He pressed a button on the comlink and heard his Master's voice. "Strategy room. Now."

Maul strode fast to a turbolift and ascended to his Master's strategy-and-communications room. Maul suspected his Master wanted to give him an update about his plan that involved the Neimoidian Trade Federation.

Although Maul did not know every detail of his Master's current project, he was aware that Sidious had established an alliance with the greedy Neimoidians. The Neimoidians were angry because the Galactic Senate had imposed taxation on the former Free Trade Zones of the Republic's outlying star systems, but then Sidious told the Neimoidians how they could force an end to the new regulations, allowing them to reap even greater profits. Sidious had instructed the Neimoidians to use their battleships to form a blockade around the planet Naboo, and then deploy battle droids to invade the world. After the invasion, the Neimoidians would force Queen Amidala to sign a treaty with the Trade Federation, a treaty that would convince the Republic Senate that the Neimoidians had assumed control of

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Naboo legally. Maul trusted that this project was part of a larger scheme, and that his Master would explain everything in time.

Exiting the turbolift, Maul found Sidious waiting in the center of the strategy room, in front of the holocomm station. Sidious was wearing his robe with the hood draped across his back. He did not look pleased.

“The Neimoidians are signaling me,” Sidious said, the irritation evident in his voice. “I want you to hear the transmission.” Raising his hood to conceal his face, he continued, “No doubt they have contacted me because of some ridiculous setback that has sent them into a panic. Stay out of sight.”

Maul moved to the side, stepping into a shadowy alcove near the comm console.

Maul watched as holograms of two Neimoidians materialized in the air before Sidious. Humanoids with lumpy grayish-green flesh and eyes with horizontal irises, the Neimoidians were Viceroy Nute Gunray, the leader of the Trade Federation, and Daultay Dofine, the captain of the Trade Federation’s flagship vessel. Nute was distinguished by a tall, crested tiara. Daultay’s head was topped by a command officer’s gray miter, and his face wore an especially worried expression.

Sidious said, “What is it?”

“This scheme of yours has failed, Lord Sidious,” Daultay replied, trembling. “We dare not go against these Jedi.”

Jedi?! Maul saw his Master stiffen in anger, and then another hologram appeared in the air. Transmitted by the Neimoidians, the hologram showed a pair of Jedi—a bearded Jedi Master and his younger Padawan apprentice—seated in a meeting room in the Neimoidians’ battleship.

Sidious sneered as he said, “Viceroy, I don’t want this stunted slime in my sight again.”

The cowardly Daultay ducked and shuffled out of view. Still facing Nute Gunray, Sidious continued, “This turn of events is unfortunate. We must accelerate our plans. Begin landing your troops.”

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Nute gasped. “My lord, is that...legal?”

“I will *make it* legal.”

Nute’s lumpy brow furrowed. “And the Jedi?”

“The Chancellor should never have brought them into this. Kill them immediately.”

“Yes. Yes, my lord,” Nute said hesitantly. “Uh...as you wish.”

Sidious broke the connection and the holograms faded out. A question formed in Maul’s mind. He knew that he should remain silent, that to interrupt his Master’s thoughts almost always brought harsh consequences. Unable to wait, Maul said, “Do you think the Neimoidians are capable of destroying the Jedi, Master? They are fools.”

Sidious nodded slowly. “Yes, they are fools. But even fools are sometimes lucky.”

Maul returned to his training room. He moved his hand over a sensor on a curved wall, and then the wall panel slid back to offer a sweeping view of Coruscant. The city appeared to spread out above, below, and around Maul. The sun was setting, and he watched the sky shift to crimson. As millions of gleaming windows and passing starships reflected the color of the sky, Maul thought the entire world looked as if it were bathed in blood. He thought it was beautiful.

And then he thought of the two Jedi who had arrived at the Neimoidians’ blockade at Naboo. He hoped the Neimoidians would fail to kill the Jedi. By the Force, he *knew* they would fail. And after all his years of training, he would be called into service to strike against the Sith’s greatest enemy.

Maul grimaced. He realized that by wishing for the Neimoidians to fail, he was also wishing for his Master’s order to fail. Maul did not like this contradiction, the conflict it presented. He did not want to be disloyal, but he couldn’t stop the feeling that gnawed within him....

The Jedi are mine. Mine to hunt. Mine to destroy.

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The feeling wasn't purely selfish. Maul wanted his Master to see that he was a worthy apprentice. As far as Maul was concerned, all his previous tests had been trivial. To fight the Jedi would be his first true test. The *ultimate* test.

From Maul's vantage point in Sidious's lair, the Jedi Temple was not visible. He closed his eyes and visualized the Temple in his mind and saw a smoking ruin. The bodies of fallen Jedi Knights and their small Padawans littered the stairwells and hallways. He saw himself standing in the rubble, surrounded by Jedi corpses. He envisioned his Master arriving to meet him at the scene.

Here is what I have done for you, Master.

I am pleased, Lord Maul.

Maul opened his eyes. His vision had been so realistic he could smell the blend of rising smoke and spilled blood. He had no doubt that he had seen something more than a dream. He knew he had glimpsed the future.

It wasn't long before Sidious once again summoned Maul to his strategy room. When Maul arrived, he found his Master wearing a quilted blue cloak with Naboo-style bloused sleeves. Sidious shrugged out of the cloak and donned his dark hooded robe.

With his face lost in shadows beneath the hood, he glanced at Maul as he gestured to the dark alcove a short distance behind the single seat at the communications console. "Stand over there," Sidious said. "Remain in the background. I may need you. Who knows what those Neimoidian slugs have managed to bungle this time?"

Sidious seated himself in front of the holoprojector and initiated a transmission to Nute Gunray's battleship. Maul watched from the dark alcove as a hologram of Nute and his diplomatic attaché Rune Haako materialized in the air before Sidious.

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Eyeing the two Neimoidians, Sidious said, "What is your report of the invasion?"

"We control all the cities in the North," Nute replied, "and are searching for any other settlements."

"And Queen Amidala, has she signed the treaty?"

"She has disappeared, my lord," Nute said ruefully. "One Naboo cruiser got past the blockade."

Sidious snarled. "I want that treaty signed."

"My lord, it's impossible to locate the ship. It's out of our range."

"Not for a Sith," Sidious said. With a discreet motion of his hand that only Maul could see, Sidious gestured for Maul to approach. Maul stepped forward so he stood just behind his Master. He braced his arms across his chest and stared down at the Neimoidians' holograms.

Sidious continued, "This is my apprentice, Darth Maul. He will find your lost ship."

Maul saw the look of surprise and dismay on the faces of both Nute and Rune Haako as they shifted their gazes from Sidious to him. He thought, *Yes, you fools. There are two of us.*

Sidious broke the connection with the Neimoidians. Turning to face Maul, he said, "Those incompetents have performed worse than my lowest expectations. Queen Amidala *must* sign that treaty." He clenched his teeth. "The Jedi are behind this, of course. They are becoming a nuisance and must be eliminated. Find them."

Maul bowed. "I will find them, Master. I will not fail."

Sio Bibble, the governor of Naboo and chair of the Naboo Royal Advisory Council, was among the many citizens captured by the Neimoidians during the invasion of Naboo. Maul scavenged holographic datatapes to replicate Sio Bibble's likeness and voice and created a fragmented message from the white-haired, bearded governor. Reviewing the message, Maul watched Bibble's simulated likeness say urgently, "...cut off all food

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supplies until you return. The death toll is catastrophic. We must bow to their wishes. You must contact me.”

Maul’s plan was to transmit the message and establish a connection trace to pinpoint the location of Queen Amidala’s starship. He routed the transmission so it would appear to originate from the Royal Palace on Naboo. And then he waited.

It did not take long for Maul to intercept a response, a brief encrypted message that said the Queen was safe and would soon return to Naboo. The response came from a small sand planet in the Arkanis sector, in the Outer Rim Territories. The planet’s name was Tatooine.

Maul found Darth Sidious standing on a balcony that curved around the outside of their secret lair on Coruscant. Sidious was apparently oblivious to the airships that whizzed past the balcony as he gazed out over the skyscrapers that illuminated the night. As Maul approached, he heard his Master mutter...

*“Far above, far above,
We don’t know where we’ll fall.
Far above, far above,
What once was great is rendered small.”*

Sidious glanced at Maul. Maul recalled the verse from his childhood and wondered why his Master had recited it, but he did not ask.

Sidious began walking on the balcony and Maul fell into step alongside him. Maul said, “A connection trace suggests the Queen is on Tatooine. She might be hiding there while she plans to retake her planet.”

Sidious shook his head. “She is not so brave. She still trusts the power of the Senate. No, that is not why they landed on Tatooine. And the reason is not your concern. Just find them.”

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“Tatooine is sparsely populated,” Maul said. “If the trace was correct, I will find them quickly, Master.”

“Move against the Jedi first. You will then have no difficulty taking the Queen to Naboo to sign the treaty.”

Sidious came to a stop at the edge of the balcony. Maul stopped beside him and said, “At last we will reveal ourselves to the Jedi. At last we will have revenge.”

“You have been well trained, my apprentice. They will be no match for you.”

Leaving his Master on the balcony, Maul proceeded to the hangar that housed his personal starship, the Sith Infiltrator named *Scimitar*. Sidious had given him the vessel, which was equipped with a powerful hyperdrive, weapons, and a rare cloaking device that rendered the ship completely invisible. Maul had used the ship on numerous missions on behalf of his Master, including recent attacks on the interstellar criminal organization Black Sun and Bartokk assassins on the planet Ralltiir.

After boarding the ship, he entered Tatooine’s coordinates into the starship’s navicomputer to plot his course through hyperspace, a course that would have him leave Coruscant via the Corellian Run and then shift to the Triellus Trade Route to reach Tatooine’s binary star system in the Arkanis sector. Minutes later, seated behind the *Scimitar*’s controls, he was rising away from Coruscant when he realized his entire body was tingling with excitement.

He could hardly wait to kill Jedi.

Chapter Fourteen

The *Scimitar* dropped out of hyperspace. Maul glanced through a shielded viewport to see the twin suns of the Tatoo system, then spotted a third point of light that was so bright it could have easily been mistaken for a small star. Maul checked the nav console and confirmed the third body was Tatooine.

Although Maul did not expect to spend much time on the sand planet, he had briefed himself about what he would find there. The Republic had no functional presence on Tatooine, which was essentially run by the Hutts, large sluglike beings whose criminal enterprises spanned the galaxy. Because water on Tatooine was so scarce, most colonists were moisture farmers. Indigenous natives included bright-eyed Jawas, hooded scavengers who drove enormous sandcrawlers through the desert in search of scrap metal and abandoned vehicles. There were also nomadic masked savages called the Tusken Raiders, known to moisture farmers as Sand People, who rode large creatures called banthas. From what Maul had gathered about the Sand People, he doubted that Queen Amidala and the Jedi would seek refuge with them. Everyone avoided Sand People.

A light flashed on the comm console. The *Scimitar* had picked up a distress signal from a nearby ship. Maul sighted the ship on his viewscreen, saw it was a small space cruiser that had stalled in

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a shipping lane. He ignored the distress signal, but as he passed by the ship, the signal grew louder, and then a voice cried from the comm, "Help us! Please, help us!"

Maul saw a large bulk freighter tumble out of hyperspace, and he assumed the freighter had arrived to assist the stalled ship. But then the stalled ship's engines fired and it raced after the *Scimitar* while the freighter came up fast on Maul's other side. Through his viewport, Maul saw panels slide back on the freighter's hull to reveal proton-torpedo launchers.

Pirates. Maul brought his fist down on the edge of his console. He felt foolish and furious for letting down his guard, for letting his ship be sighted, for leaving himself open to an attack. He did not want any witnesses to his arrival on Tatooine. His mission was too important. But he knew that the pirates had never seen a ship like his before, that they were fully intent on seizing it. He dared not activate the *Scimitar's* cloaking device, because that would only draw more attention to the ship's existence. The pirates would love to get their hands on an exotic cloak, and if they couldn't, they would doubtlessly talk about the ship, and their talk might reach the Jedi on Tatooine. All these thoughts raced through his head in just a few seconds.

Maul knew he would have to kill the pirates. Every one of them.

He increased energy to the *Scimitar's* deflector shields as he angled away from the other ships, but they veered along with him and cut him off, just as he had expected. Then the space cruiser opened fire and the *Scimitar* was rocked by the blast, a warning shot. He responded by cutting power, letting his deflector shields fall. The *Scimitar* came to a dead stop in space.

Anticipating that the pirates would board the *Scimitar*, he went to the back of his ship and climbed into a cramped escape pod. As the pod's hatch sealed with a hiss, he consulted a monitor to watch the bulk freighter draw closer. An armored docking tube extended from the freighter.

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Maul slid the pod's release mechanism as he activated its engine, keeping it set on low power. The pod drifted a short distance away from the *Scimitar's* hull, and he maneuvered so the *Scimitar* concealed his position from the approaching freighter. He was not about to let anyone claim his ship. When he was certain the pirates had boarded the *Scimitar*, he guided the pod straight for the bulk freighter.

The freighter was an unremarkable model, essentially an enormous box with a hyperdrive. Maul saw the hull was covered with grime and space dust as well as scorched by cannon fire. The freighter's docking bay was open, apparently in preparation to receive the *Scimitar*.

Maul guided his small pod into the freighter's docking bay, which was large enough to contain both the *Scimitar* and the pirate's cruiser. Illuminated by bright lamps, the docking bay was cluttered with debris and piles of rotting food. As he looked for a clear spot to land, he spotted two pirates. They were Togorians, tall beings covered with matted fur, their powerful arms ending in incredibly sharp claws. The Togorians were using their claws to tear open large metal crates, and Maul assumed the crates had been seized from some previous victim. Togorians were notoriously greedy as well as murderous.

Both Togorians glanced at the escape pod as it landed neatly in the cluttered docking bay, then returned their attention to opening the crates. Maul knew that they assumed a fellow pirate had landed the pod.

Maul opened the pod's hatch, leaped out, activated his lightsaber, and charged the two Togorians. One pirate unsheathed a vibroblade while the other snared a vibro-axe. Maul immediately evaluated that the one with the vibroblade favored his left side, and that the other pirate was clumsy. They meant nothing more to him than any other targets.

Maul flipped through the air and his blade swept through the right side of the first pirate. The arm holding the vibroblade fell upon the deck with a sickening thud, and then the stunned

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Togorian collapsed beside it. Maul drove his lightsaber through the fallen pirate's chest but did not pause to watch the Togorian's body jerk and die. He was already racing toward the second pirate, who was bigger than the first.

But instead of standing his ground, the Togorian bolted away from Maul and ran for a comlink station beside a nearby hatch. Not wanting the entire ship alerted to his presence, Maul summoned the power of the dark side and focused it on the pirate. The Togorian was thrown off his feet. He flew past the comlink station and smashed into the bulkhead. Maul had intended for the impact to kill the Togorian, but the pirate, still clutching his vibro-axe, staggered back from the bulkhead and roared with rage as he turned to face his attacker.

The Togorian ran for Maul. Maul spun his lightsaber and the Togorian's wrist separated from his arm. The Togorian saw his hand and vibro-axe fall to the deck, and he howled. Maul's blade spun again, and connected with the Togorian's neck. The pirate's body collapsed.

Maul's pulse had not increased during the fight. His breathing remained steady. Deactivating his lightsaber, he stepped through a hatch and raced down a filthy corridor, littered with discarded junk, heading for the bulk freighter's bridge.

Unlike the docking bay, the bridge was dim, primarily illuminated by sensor scopes and datascreens. Maul blinked his eyes, letting his vision adjust to the darkness, then he slunk into the bridge without a sound. Overhead, large metal cages dangled from the ceiling. The cages were filled with the motionless forms of many creatures, their faces gaping in wide-eyed agony. Maul realized the creatures had been killed but their bodies preserved, their expressions frozen at the moment of their deaths. He was disappointed that the corpses didn't include any Jedi.

Below the cages, four Togorians were staring at a console, watching a monitor that displayed another Togorian, who was standing within the *Scimitar*. The on-screen Togorian's fur was elaborately braided and ornamented with glittering objects. Over

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the comlink, the pirate with the boarding party reported, "I'm telling you, there's no one on board!"

One of the four Togorians who stood before the monitor wore a necklace made from assorted skulls. Maul guessed him to be the captain and knew he was correct by the way the Togorian barked, "You looked for hidden compartments?"

Sounding exasperated, the Togorian on the monitor replied, "Of course we searched for hidden compartments, we're not fools! It's an unmanned ship. The course was set for Tatooine. That's why it didn't answer the distress signal. Have you ever seen a ship like this? I haven't!"

The captain appeared to be weighing his options, then growled, "All right, idiot. Bring both ships into the loading dock. The bay is still open. If you do find any passengers, kill them."

The captain broke the connection and the monitor went dark. One of the other pirates growled, "Hela-Tan is a fool. They could be in hiding."

"Then we'll find them," the second pirate said.

"Or they could have escaped," added the third.

"Shut your flapping mouth," snorted the Togorian captain. "What's the difference? We have the ship." He turned away from the others.

Maul moved fast. He activated his lightsaber and cut the nearest Togorian in half. The Togorian did not cry out, but the noise of his collapsing body caused his fellow pirates to turn. The captain faced Maul, baring his fangs. Drawing two vibro-axes from his belt, the captain roared, "Prepare to die, scum!"

Maul wondered why so many opponents felt compelled to announce their intentions with threats and taunts. Deciding to save the captain for last, he flipped across the bridge, kicked the second pirate in the throat, and then drove his lightsaber through the pirate's chest. The second pirate fell.

The third pirate whipped out a vibroblade. Maul charged him. As Maul's lightsaber cleaved through his target, he sensed that the captain was taking aim at his back. Leaping from the third

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pirate's dead body, Maul soared backward over the captain's head just as the captain's vibro-axes met with a loud, energized shriek where Maul had been standing just a fraction of a second earlier. Maul grabbed hold of the bars on an overhead cage and swung himself to land behind the captain.

The clashing vibro-axes ignited, illuminating the remains of the caged wretches and casting ghastly shadows throughout the bridge. Prying his vibro-axes away from each other, the captain turned to face Maul again. Blood pounded in Maul's ears as he spun his lightsaber, slashing the captain's arms before delivering a killing blow.

From the comm console, a Togorian's voice crackled, "Approaching docking bay."

Maul stepped to the console. He did not activate the visual monitor as he lowered his face over the comm and said, "Proceed to the bridge." Then Maul turned his attention to the freighter's computer. He knew Togorian pirates always fled the scene of a crime immediately to avoid capture. And thanks to his mechanical training with Sidious, it took only a few seconds to interface the freighter's propulsion units with the proton torpedoes. The moment the Togorians punched the ignition for their engines, the entire ship would blow up.

Leaving the bridge, Maul ran back to the docking bay. He heard the pirates approaching and ducked into a side corridor. He watched the pirates stagger past his position, heading toward the bridge. They were already arguing about how they should divide the spoils from the strange, newly acquired starship.

After the Togorians were gone, Maul hurried across the brightly lit bay. The *Scimitar* rested beside the pirates' space cruiser. He ran past the escape pod that had delivered him to the docking bay. He had already resolved that he did not have time to recover the pod.

The *Scimitar's* boarding ramp was down. Maul ran up the ramp and nearly collided with the Togorian whose fur was decorated with glittering objects. Up close, Maul saw that the

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objects were sharp razors, and that this Togorian was bigger than the others. Much bigger.

Maul surmised the pirate had remained on the ship so he could take what he wanted before the others had their chance. The pirate was holding two fistfuls of credits that Maul kept aboard for emergencies, and was about to deposit the credits in an open satchel at his feet. Maul saw the satchel was bulging, and suspected the pirate had also found his stash of crystals, which he kept for worlds that did not accept credits.

Maul activated his lightsaber. The pirate tossed the credits aside and removed his vibro-axe from his belt. Eyes fixed on Maul, the pirate said, "There you are." He stuck out his thick purple tongue and dragged it across his lips. "Think you can escape me? Think again. I'll finish the job."

Maul was irritated by the Togorians' tendency to taunt before striking. He was also eager to leave the freighter, as he expected the other pirates would start the engines at any moment. He whirled in an arc and went for the hulking Togorian's chest.

Incredibly, the pirate sidestepped the attack. His vibro-axe swept past Maul's shoulder but smashed into the *Scimitar's* auxiliary control console. Maul saw the damage was minimal, but seethed with rage. Hoping to prevent further damage to his ship, he leaped past the pirate and flipped down the *Scimitar's* boarding ramp. The pirate followed.

Jumping to the docking bay's deck, the pirate shook his fur, and his glittering, decorative shards reflected the lights from the bright lamps that illuminated the docking bay. The light momentarily dazzled Maul's vision, causing him to lose focus as the pirate swung his vibro-axe. Maul jumped away, but not before the vibro-axe's blade caught his leg. Maul felt the blade slice into his flesh. He bared his teeth as if he were biting on the pain itself.

He glared at his opponent, then leaped and twisted in midair, spinning his lightsaber at the pirate. Maul's blade took off the pirate's arm before landing. The pirate collapsed, and Maul struck

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him again, but it was not a killing blow because he did not wish for the pirate to die immediately. He wanted the pirate to die in agony.

Ignoring his own wound, Maul deactivated his lightsaber, jumped over the pirate's body, and raced back up the *Scimitar's* boarding ramp. Although he wished he were already seated behind the controls on the upper deck, he didn't dare waste the few seconds it would take for the lift to carry him to the bridge. As the boarding ramp automatically retracted, he went straight to the auxiliary control console that the Togorian had struck earlier. He was checking the console to make sure it was fully operational when he heard a loud hum outside his ship. He knew the noise was the freighter's preliminary ignition warming up. He tapped at the console's controls and powered up the *Scimitar's* shields and engines.

A warning light flashed. The *Scimitar's* ramp had retracted but the hatch was still open. Maul heard an inhuman roar from behind and turned to see that the hulking pirate—minus one arm, and with his face covered in blood—had wedged himself into the boarding hatch, his body pinned between the hatch's doors. Clutching to the inner hatch with his remaining hand's bloodied claws, the Togorian wasn't about to let go on his own.

The pirate's legs were still dangling out of the hatch as Maul pushed the *Scimitar's* engines to full power and blasted out of the freighter's docking bay. Alarms wailed as air rushed out the open hatch. As the *Scimitar* soared into space, Maul was yanked off his feet and hurled toward the pirate in the hatch.

Maul's wounded leg slammed against the bulkhead inside the hatch. Air was torn from his lungs as his fingers seized a metal rung. His face was mere centimeters from the Togorian's, and he could see from the pirate's frenzied expression that he had every intention of making sure Maul died with him.

Maul rammed his horned head into the pirate's skull. The pirate's one-handed grip loosened. Maul twisted his body and kicked the pirate's midsection. The pirate roared and sank his

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claws into the inside of the hatch's frame. The dark side surged through Maul, and he kicked the pirate in the face.

Behind the *Scimitar*, the bulk freighter exploded, spraying burning fuel and shredded metal in all directions. The resulting shock wave rocked the *Scimitar*, and the Togorian was blown away from the hatch. Maul hit the hatch's emergency button and it sealed instantly, sending him rolling back into the *Scimitar*.

Emergency air flooded into the lower deck. Maul gasped as he scrambled onto the lift. Arriving on the upper deck, he did not limp as he went to his seat and settled behind the controls. He took a deep breath. He felt good to be alive after his enemies were dead.

Angling away from the wreckage of the pirate ships, he guided the *Scimitar* toward Tatooine. He knew he should treat his wound soon but decided to wait until after he'd landed. Meanwhile, his pain gave him something to focus on.

He was looking forward to finding more enemies.

From space, Tatooine looked like a scorched sphere with just a few small, scattered clouds. The *Scimitar*'s sensors directed Maul to the planet's larger spaceports and settlements, and he was pleased to see that night had fallen over those areas. From experience, he had come to prefer night landings, because most so-called civilized beings liked to have their lights on at night. They revealed themselves. Even Sand People and Jawas were known to huddle around open fires after the twin suns set.

As the *Scimitar* descended to the sand planet's dark hemisphere, Maul began to see the lights of the more populated areas as well as solitary moisture farms. Queen Amidala's ship could be anywhere on Tatooine, but he was confident he would find it.

He landed his ship on a mesa. He did not leave the *Scimitar* until he was certain that no detectors were aimed in his direction and that he had arrived unnoticed. Carrying his electrobinoculars, and wearing a programmable wrist link above his left hand, he

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stepped down the boarding ramp and onto the hard-packed sand. The air was cool and incredibly dry, and a few stars were already visible in the evening sky.

Maul came to a stop. From where he stood, he could see the distant lights of three settlements. His electro-binoculars were equipped with radiation sensors for night vision and powerful light-gathering components for long-distance scanning. He raised the electrobinoculars to his eyes and scanned the terrain to his left. According to the data display on his electrobinocular viewscreen, he was looking at Mos Espa, one of Tatooine's largest spaceports.

Turning almost completely around, Maul viewed the city of Mos Taike, which was located between the Northern Dune Sea and another broad area of barren desert, the Xelric Draw. Shifting to his left, he viewed another spaceport, Mos Entha.

Maul lowered the electrobinoculars, tapped a command into his wrist link to summon his probe droids, and turned to face the *Scimitar*. He watched three bulbous, black Dark Eye probe droids hover out of the aft hatch. Each sensor-laden probe droid had been programmed to seek out Queen Amidala, her ship, and the two Jedi who had escaped with her from Naboo.

The three probe droids glided past Maul before they separated, each veering off toward one of the three populated areas. After they were gone, Maul trudged back to the *Scimitar* so he could monitor the droids' progress. The sand sucked at his boots, making every step an effort.

Sweat beaded on his tattooed forehead. His wounded leg was practically screaming for treatment. But even after he was back inside the *Scimitar*, he delayed reaching for a medpac. He worked with the pain, manipulating it, shaping it into desire. He craved revenge against the Jedi. They were the reason he had traveled to Tatooine. If not for their existence, his encounter with the Togorian pirates never would have happened. His desire for vengeance grew like a blanket of darkness around him. Only after he felt consumed by anger did he dress his wound.

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Maul grinned. The pain was nothing compared to what he would do to the Jedi.

Chapter Fifteen

Maul unloaded his speeder bike from the *Scimitar*'s underside cargo hatch. It was the day after his arrival on Tatooine, and the twin suns were blazing in the sky. He had already received significant transmissions from his three probe droids.

The first probe droid had sighted a tall, bearded man carrying a lightsaber at Mos Espa Grand Arena after a Podracing competition. The second probe droid had been destroyed—possibly by a lightsaber—before it transmitted an image of a run-down light freighter named the *Dusty Duck*, which had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Fortunately, the third probe droid had discovered the location of Queen Amidala's starship in the Xelric Draw. Now Maul was waiting for the first probe droid to return with a full report from Mos Espa. And he wanted his bike ready if he needed it.

The bike was a custom Razalon FC-20 repulsorlift speeder, equipped with a quiet but powerful rear thrust engine, ideal for covert missions and sneak attacks. The bike had no built-in weapons, sensors, or shields, as Maul believed his own skills and lightsaber were sufficient to overcome any enemy.

Thanks to the combination of his discipline and remarkable powers of recuperation, Maul did not limp as he walked, using one hand to nudge his bike through the arid air, away from his

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ship. He had treated his leg with bacta and wrapped it in bandages. When he was fully healed, not even a scar would exist as evidence of his fight with the Togorian.

But his leg still ached. Earlier, after discovering bantha tracks near the *Scimitar*, he had had a brief encounter with Sand People. He suspected they had intended to lure him away from his ship and kill him. He had refrained from slaughtering them because a pile of dead Sand People might have drawn unnecessary attention. Still, running back to the *Scimitar* had not been good for his leg.

I'll rest after the Jedi are dead.

Maul left his bike hovering in the air behind him and came to a stop at the edge of the mesa. He gazed toward Mos Espa. And then he saw the probe droid zipping over the sand, approaching his position. The probe droid came to a stop less than a meter away from Maul's face. The droid uttered a few words in its own language, but Maul understood.

A Jedi had left Mos Espa and was returning to the Queen's ship.

Maul walked back to his bike, climbed onto its saddle, and launched off the mesa, leaving the watchful probe droid with the *Scimitar*. Maul's black cloak whipped at his back as he raced over the desert floor and into the Xelric Draw.

He soon saw the Queen's starship, still resting where his droid had sighted it earlier. Despite a layer of dust, the ship's highly polished silver exterior gleamed under the bright desert sky. The ship's boarding ramp was lowered.

And then Maul sighted two figures in front of him, both running toward the ship. The nearest figure appeared to be a child, a young boy. Beyond the boy was the tall Jedi.

Maul sensed something about the boy. The boy seemed to emanate ripples in the Force, but the ripples were unfocused, uncontrolled. This surprised Maul but did not distract him. He stayed focused on his target, the Jedi. If he happened also to mow down the boy in his path, so be it.

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Maul accelerated. He was almost on top of the boy when the Jedi turned and shouted, and then the boy fell flat to the ground. As Maul's bike passed over the boy's prone body, Maul realized the Jedi must have commanded the boy to fall. He was intrigued by the fact that the boy had obeyed without hesitation, without looking back. Most boys would have stopped and turned.

Dismissing the boy as insignificant, Maul cut the bike's engine and leaped from it, sailing over the Jedi's head as he activated his lightsaber in midair. The Jedi activated his own green-bladed lightsaber and raised it fast to block Maul's sweeping blade. The lightsabers met with a bright flash of energy before Maul landed on his feet in a tight crouch.

The pain in his leg was exquisite.

Up close, Maul saw the Jedi was a big man. The Jedi shouted at the boy to go. Maul swung hard with his lightsaber but the Jedi blocked the blow. The Jedi shouted, "Tell them to take off!"

As the boy ran for the Queen's ship, Maul lashed out at the Jedi again and again, but the Jedi blocked each blow. Maul was suddenly aware that the Jedi seemed to anticipate each lunge and jab, as if he knew how Maul would move before Maul himself knew. Maul drew from the dark side of the Force and began to move faster, increasing the speed of his lunges along with his footwork. The Jedi kept up with Maul, but Maul soon sensed...

He's getting tired.

Maul felt the pain in his leg become more intense. He became angry at himself for being wounded, used the anger to fuel the dark side, and directed his rage at the Jedi. Maul was certain he would defeat his opponent.

He will fall heavily, like a monument.

But the Jedi did not falter. As Maul spun and moved around the Jedi, he saw the Queen's starship lift off. He also saw the boarding ramp was still extended.

Maul leaped over the Jedi, blocking his path to the rising ship, as their lightsabers continued to weave and smash into each other. The ship had just moved above their position when the

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Jedi leaped straight up and landed on the extended ramp, his lightsaber still blazing.

Maul watched the ship rise away from the desert, taking the Jedi with it. He deactivated his lightsaber and continued to stand where his feet were planted. Within seconds, the ascending ship vanished in the sky.

Maul tasted sand in his mouth. And blood. He continued to watch the sky as he felt almost overwhelmed by his humiliation. He had never felt such shame before. The shame was darker than any darkness he had ever known.

He found the darkness pleasing.

Maul had no reason to remain on Tatooine. He recovered his speeder bike and rode back to the *Scimitar*.

He transmitted a report, notifying his Master that the Jedi had escaped with Queen Amidala, and that he would be returning directly to Coruscant. He did not mention his run-in with the Togorian pirates in his report, nor his less significant encounter with the Sand People, because he knew his Master would be displeased. His Master would not be interested in explanations. His Master would only accuse him of allowing himself to be snared by the pirates and distracted by the Sand People.

As the Sith Infiltrator lifted away from Tatooine, Maul continued to contemplate how Sidious would respond if he learned about his apprentice's mis-adventures. If Maul admitted he had sustained a leg wound, his Master would regard him as weak. But because his leg wound was already almost healed, he questioned whether it was even necessary to inform his Master about it.

Concealing details from his Master was impossible. Sidious always knew everything about Maul's thoughts and actions. However, Maul knew his Master would not wish to be distracted by information that had nothing to do with conquering Naboo and destroying the Jedi. A wounded leg was beyond trivial. If he

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and his Master were to proceed, they would focus on moving forward.

The Sith Infiltrator left Tatooine's orbit and launched into hyperspace.

Chapter Sixteen

Arriving at Coruscant, Maul guided the *Scimitar* to the dark hemisphere, where night had fallen, angling past illuminated skyscrapers to the spire that housed Sidious's secret headquarters. He docked the Infiltrator in a landing bay, checked to make sure the landing bay was secure, and then went to meet with his Master.

He found Sidious's hooded figure seated in the middle of the otherwise empty meditation room. The door slid closed behind Maul. Sidious said, "Report."

"Queen Amidala and the Jedi *were* on Tatooine, Master. A Jedi and a young boy were running for the Queen's starship when I came upon them in the desert. The Jedi and I dueled. I nearly had him. But the boy reached the ship, the ship lifted off, and the Jedi leaped to it. I failed to stop them, Master."

Because of his Master's cowl, Maul could not see his Master's eyes, but he watched the lower half of Sidious's face, staying alert for any slight twitch at the mouth or change in skin tone that would indicate his Master was angry. But his Master's expression remained neutral as he said, "You feel you would have defeated this Jedi?"

"Yes, Master. I felt him tire. I can defeat him."

"Was he bearded?"

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Maul nodded.

“Good. That is Qui-Gon Jinn. He is the stronger of the two. His Padawan is Obi-Wan Kenobi.”

Sidious sounded satisfied, which puzzled Maul. He had imagined Sidious would be furious with him for failing to stop the Jedi and the Queen. But then it suddenly occurred to Maul...*The Jedi will deliver the Queen to Coruscant, because the foolish Queen will think the Senate can help her.* Maul realized he could have another opportunity to please his Master. But before he could announce his deduction, his Master said, “Queen Amidala believes the Galactic Senate will support her. She has already arrived on Coruscant. She is staying in the Senatorial quarters.”

Maul stiffened. “And the Jedi?”

“They are on Coruscant as well.”

Maul’s hand shifted to the hilt of his lightsaber. He felt a burning that began in his chest and spread outward. “Let me kill them, Master.”

“Not here,” Sidious said. “Not on Coruscant. I have another plan.”

And then Maul sensed Sidious was preoccupied by other thoughts. He seemed oblivious to Maul’s presence. Maul left the meditation room and went to his own quarters.

As soon as he was alone, he wondered whether his Master was actually furious and was now only delaying punishment. *Is he aware of my battle with the pirates? Of my foolish decision to follow the bantha tracks? Did he sense my leg wound?* Maul would not be surprised if his Master was just waiting to punish him like never before. He felt ashamed.

But then he thought of his Master’s teachings. *Think of the now. Think of the future. Do not meditate on the past.*

Maul knew what he must do. He would use his shame, turn it inward to feed the darkness and hatred that flowed through his veins. He would direct his fury at his enemy, the Jedi named Qui-Gon Jinn.

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In the past, Maul had never cared about the names of the people he'd killed. To him, enemies were nothing more than targets. But now he said Qui-Gon Jinn's name aloud. He clenched his teeth and repeated the name, then began chanting it like a curse.

I will destroy you, Qui-Gon Jinn. I will see the shock in your eyes when I run you through, Qui-Gon Jinn. I will stand over your dead body in triumph, Qui-Gon Jinn.

Because of you, I have failed my Master.

You will pay.

Hours passed. Maul's comlink chirped. His Master was summoning him to the strategy room. Maul went. He found his Master shrugging out of the robe he wore in his guise as Palpatine, and realized his Master had returned from the Senate building.

"Queen Amidala will attempt to bring the Senate to her cause," Sidious said with pleasure. "She will ask them to outlaw the Trade Federation blockade of Naboo." He chortled happily.

Maul had never seen his Master in such a jovial mood. He thought, *My mistakes don't matter. Unless he is distracted by current events and will turn on me later...*

"I anticipate the Queen will return to Naboo," Sidious continued. "No doubt the Jedi will accompany her. Foolish girl." He smiled at Maul. "Come. Let us contact the Neimoidians and share the good news."

Sidious pulled on his dark robe, lifted its hood up over his head, stood before the communications console, and activated the holocomm. Maul stayed out of sight in the alcove behind Sidious's seat and watched as holograms of Nute Gunray and Rune Haako materialized in the air. Many light-years away, in Theed Royal Palace on the planet Naboo, Nute looked anxious as he said, "Yes, Lord Sidious?"

"The Queen will soon be on her way to you. I regret she is of no further use to us. Destroy her when she arrives."

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Nute nodded. "Yes, my lord."

"Is the planet secure?"

"We have taken over the last pockets of primitive life-forms. We are in complete control of the planet now."

"Good," Sidious said. "I will see to it that in the Senate, things stay as they are. I am sending my apprentice, Darth Maul, to join you."

"Yes, my lord."

Sidious broke the connection and the holograms disappeared. Still facing the comm console, he laughed. "Soon the Neimoidians will no longer be useful to us. What a fine day that will be." He turned to face Maul. "Make sure the Neimoidians take care of Queen Amidala. You yourself must destroy the Jedi. Do not fail me again."

Maul bowed to his Master, then left quickly for the Sith Infiltrator.

When the *Scimitar* exited hyperspace in the Naboo system, Maul saw a single Droid Control Ship, the only remnant of the Trade Federation's blockade, in Naboo's orbit. Although the Neimoidians were expecting his arrival, Maul had activated the *Scimitar*'s cloaking technology to guarantee they would not be aware of his ship approaching the planet. He thought it would be best if he presented himself to Nute Gunray unannounced.

Naboo was a small world, covered by grassy plains, verdant mountains, and clear, unpolluted seas and lakes. As Maul descended through the atmosphere, he saw a flock of large, graceful birds soaring away from a waterfall that plunged over the edge of a steep cliff. Maul imagined what Naboo would be like if it were reduced to a lifeless, smoldering rock. He grinned at the thought.

He guided the *Scimitar* to the capital city of Theed. The city's architecture consisted primarily of elegantly designed domed structures, most of which appeared quite old but also well maintained. The largest structure was Theed Royal Palace, an

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interconnected cluster of domed spires that rose from a high cliff. As Maul landed his ship, he thought of Queen Amidala growing up in such rich, comfortable surroundings, with her handmaidens and assorted servants seeing to her every need.

Pampered weaklings.

From Maul's perspective, death could not come soon enough for the people of Naboo.

The Neimoidians had seized Theed Royal Palace as their own headquarters, and had settled into its lavish rooms as if they had owned it for years. Maul found Nute Gunray in Queen Amidala's private bedroom. He was lying sound asleep on a plush couch, a coverlet of soft shimmersilk draped over his body. Maul yanked away the coverlet and delivered a swift, hard kick to Nute's side.

Waking in a panic, Nute exclaimed, "Are they invading?!" And then he saw Darth Maul looming over him.

Maul glared with open disgust at the Neimoidian leader. "Get out. These are now my quarters."

Nute scrambled to his feet. He was taller than Maul, but Maul looked at him as if he were an insignificant bug. Nute tried to take the shimmersilk coverlet with him, but Maul snatched it and tore it in half. Maul said, "Send someone to remove the traces of your presence here."

Eager to distance himself from Maul, Nute shuffled quickly out of the bedroom. Maul looked around at the Queen's furnishings and laughed. He had no desire to sleep in such an extravagant room, but he had enjoyed terrifying Nute.

Leaving the bedroom, Maul thoroughly inspected the palace. Everywhere he looked, from the floor-to-ceiling windows to the grand hallways and staircases, he saw evidence of fine craftsmanship. He reconsidered the bedroom. Although he had been raised to associate luxury with weakness, he found satisfaction in the idea that there was nothing to stop him from claiming the palace as his own. There were no rules for how and where the Sith Lords should live *after* they achieved their goals,

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and Maul doubted that his Master expected him to rule from a small room with bare walls. He wondered if he had been too quick to envision laying waste to the entire planet. He could imagine worse fates than ruling from the opulent palace. And the Naboo plains and forests were rich with wild beasts ready for slaughter.

He made his way to the throne room. There he found Nute, seated on the throne, talking with Rune Haako. The Neimoidians looked up with alarm as Maul approached. Maul took pleasure in watching Nute cling desperately to the throne's broad arms, as if Maul might yank it out from underneath him. Maul said, "Status report."

Unable to meet Maul's gaze, Nute blinked his large eyes and said, "Things are...er, going well."

"Most of the Naboo people have been captured," Rune chimed in. "We have them in camps. A few have eluded us, but we shall crush them soon. As for Queen Amidala, every Trade Federation troop in the area is on alert, watching for her ship. We expect her to land in the city's central plaza, and that she will attempt to negotiate with us while using the Jedi as her shields. She will not slip through any of our safeguards."

Maul scowled. "Unless she is already here."

The Neimoidians glanced at each other and cried out at the same time, "Impossible!"

"I suggest we inspect the security around the plaza."

Nute and Rune babbled their approval. They shuffled after Maul as he led them outside to the wide plaza. Maul imagined that the plaza was usually crowded with citizens, musicians, and merchants and the air was filled with conversation and singing birds. But now the only sound was the distant, clanking footfalls of droid troops. Maul enjoyed the desolation. However, he was not deceived by the overall quiet. Looking up at the cloudless sky, he thought, *A storm is coming. A death storm.*

Jedi will die.

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Rune pointed to a detachment of Federation battle droids that was marching across the opposite end of the plaza. He said, "They are timed to cover the plaza every fifteen minutes."

"Make it every five," Maul said as he scanned the surrounding buildings.

"But Lord Maul," Rune said uneasily, "what of the few citizens who have so far resisted us? Shouldn't we keep the troops spread out?"

Maul fixed his yellow eyes on Rune. "Do you think," Maul said, "the Queen will dawdle when she arrives, and simply wait for you to pick her up? *Think*, cretin. Where do you think she'll be heading?"

"Five-minute patrols!" Nute barked into his comlink. "Cover the plaza every five minutes!"

Maul gestured to the balconies that overlooked the plaza. "There should be surveillance at all times. Infrared sensors to alert the patrols."

"It shall be done," Rune said.

Nute's comlink signaled. He glanced at it anxiously.

"I suggest you answer that," Maul said, "or I'll throw you over a waterfall."

Nute pressed a button on his comlink and said, "Report."

The voice of a battle droid command officer responded flatly, "The Queen's starship has been found in the Naboo swamps, Viceroy."

Nute looked stunned. "Have you captured her?"

"The ship is empty, Viceroy," the officer replied. "There is no sign of the Queen's party. They have disappeared."

Nute and Rune glanced at each other. Rune's mouth was agape. Neither dared to face Maul. Still clutching the comlink, Nute said, voice trembling, "Send out patrols. Search for her."

Maul grabbed the comlink and switched it off. Through clenched teeth, he hissed at Nute, "Everything is under control, you say? You'll pay for this. Now we must contact Lord Sidious."

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Nute nodded obediently as his mottled face turned a more sickly shade of green.

Maul led the two Neimoidians back to the palace's throne room. Nute seated himself quickly on the throne. Maul stood near Nute while Rune activated the holocomm, sending a transmission to Sidious. A moment later, a hologram of Maul's hooded Master flickered to life. Sidious said, "Yes, Viceroy?"

"Lord Sidious." Nute cleared his throat. "The Queen and the Jedi...they are on Naboo, but did not arrive where we expected."

Sidious frowned slightly, then said, "Go on."

"We've sent out patrols," Nute continued. "We already located their starship in the swamp. It won't be long, my lord."

"This is an unexpected move for her," Sidious said. "It's too aggressive." His hologram shifted. Even though Sidious's eyes were lost in shadow, Maul knew that his Master's gaze was now on him. "Lord Maul, be mindful. Let them make the first move."

"Yes, my Master."

While the Neimoidians scurried about the palace, Maul stood in a dark chamber near the throne room and meditated. He visualized the fight he knew would come, the inevitable duel with Qui-Gon Jinn. On Tatooine, he knew he had been wearing down the Jedi Knight. He had sensed that Qui-Gon Jinn fought without fear, but also without hate.

He will know fear. And I will make him hate me.

Maul heard someone running toward him. Annoyed by the interruption, he turned to face Nute Gunray. Nute cried out, "She is assembling an army!"

Chapter Seventeen

“According to our patrols,” Rune Haako said, “Queen Amidala contacted the Gungans, the primitives in the swamp.”

Maul had not anticipated that the Queen would join forces with the Gungans, Naboo’s amphibious natives. He turned to face Nute Gunray. “You said the primitives had all been rounded up.”

“They went into hiding!” Nute exclaimed. “They know the terrain better than we do....” Seeing Maul’s angered glare, Nute went silent.

Rune said, “The Gungans are not a concern. They are no match for our forces. The Trade Federation droid army and weapons are invincible.”

Maul could only guess what Queen Amidala thought she might accomplish. All her starfighters had been confiscated. Her volunteer pilots and officers were being held in camps. Desperate for help, she had turned to her planet’s lesser life-forms, amphibious humanoids. Still, she had the Jedi on her side. Unable to determine what the Queen was planning, Maul said, “I must contact my Master.”

“We should return to the throne room,” Rune Haako said, gesturing to a four-legged Neimoidian mechno-holoprojector he had brought for Nute Gunray’s convenience.

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"We'll walk," Maul said as he went to the holoprojector and activated it. Less than a minute later, Sidious's hologram appeared, his gaze directed at Maul, Nute, and Rune, who followed the ambulatory device as it crawled through a palace corridor on its sharply tapered metal feet.

"The Queen has an army, my Master," Maul said. "She has allied with Naboo's Gungan population. They must be planning to strike against the Trade Federation's superior forces." Maul grimaced. "I feel there is more to this, my Master. The two Jedi may be using the Queen for their own purposes."

"The Jedi cannot become involved," Sidious said with authority, his hologram bobbing gently back and forth along with the movement of the walking holo-projector. "They can only protect the Queen. Even Qui-Gon Jinn will not break that covenant."

Maul had not considered the fact that the Jedi, by tradition and the rules of their Order, did not fight in wars. His Master never overlooked any details.

"Our young Queen surprises me," Sidious continued. "She is more foolish than I thought."

Nute said, "We are sending all troops to meet this army assembling near the swamp. It appears to be made up of primitives."

"This will work to our advantage," Sidious responded. Maul noticed that his Master actually sounded pleased.

The holoprojector came to a stop in the corridor. Maul, Nute, and Rune stopped beside it, their eyes fixed on Sidious's hologram. Rune said eagerly, "I have your approval to proceed, then, my lord?"

"Wipe them out," Sidious replied without hesitation. "All of them." Sidious's hologram flickered and vanished.

Maul, Nute, and Rune proceeded to the throne room. A large viewscreen was built into one wall, and displayed a view of the palace's outdoor plaza. Looking up at the viewscreen, the Neimoidians were startled to see the Jedi Knight and his

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apprentice cutting down battle droids who had been guarding the palace. The Jedi were accompanied by Naboo soldiers and pilots. Some soldiers were on foot, and others arrived in armored landspeeders that carried blaster cannons.

Rune whispered, "How did they get into the city?"

"I don't know," Nute said, shaking his head as he watched the Naboo soldiers fire Federation tanks. "I thought the battle was going to take place far from here." Eyes wide with fear, he added, "This is too close."

"I told you there was more to this," Maul said. "The Jedi *are* involved. They have come to Theed for a reason, Viceroy. They have a plan of their own for defeating us."

Looking even more alarmed, Nute said, "A plan?"

"One that will fail, I assure you." Maul glared at the images on the viewscreen. "I have waited a long time for this. I have trained for it endlessly. The Jedi will regret their decision to return here." His hand flexed near his lightsaber. "Wait here until I return." He walked past the Neimoidians, heading for a tall doorway.

"Where are you going?" Nute demanded frantically.

"Where do you think I'm going, Viceroy?" Maul answered without breaking his stride. "I'm going to the main hangar to rid you of the Jedi once and for all."

The Queen's pilots managed to liberate more than a dozen Naboo starfighters from the Theed hangar before Maul's arrival. Maul saw the sleek, gleaming starfighters climb into the sky and suspected they were heading for the Trade Federation's Droid Control Ship. Because the control ship carried more than one thousand droid starfighters, Maul doubted the Queen's pilots would survive more than a few minutes. *Fools.*

He entered the air base and made his way to the hangar's entrance, which was sealed by blast-proof durasteel double doors. Lowering his gaze to the floor, he reached out with his senses. He detected movement on the other side of the doors.

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He knew the Jedi were approaching, walking straight toward his position.

The double doors slid open. Maul lifted his gaze. He faced Queen Amidala, who was with a group of armed Naboo guards and two handmaidens. Seeing Maul, the group had come to a dead stop. Maul spotted the two Jedi behind the guards and locked his eyes on Qui-Gon Jinn.

"We'll handle this," Qui-Gon Jinn said as he and Obi-Wan Kenobi moved forward, side by side, edging past the guards.

"We'll take the long way," Queen Amidala said as she rushed with her remaining allies toward a side passage.

Keeping his eyes on the Jedi, Maul lifted his hood back, revealing his horned head. He shrugged off his cloak and let it fall to the floor. The two Jedi did the same with their robes.

The Queen, her guards, and the handmaidens were still running for a nearby exit when three Trade Federation destroyer droids wheeled fast from around a corner and into the hangar. The droids stopped quickly, then rapidly unfurled their tripod legs and built-in blaster cannons, activated their deflector shields, and opened fire in the Queen's direction.

While the Queen and her retinue took cover and fired their blasters at the droids, Maul drew his lightsaber and activated one red blade. Gripping the lightsaber in his left hand, he extended his arm forward and activated the second blade. The Jedi activated their lightsabers, and Maul noticed Qui-Gon Jinn's blade flashed a fraction of a second after Obi-Wan's.

The old Jedi's getting slow.

Maul made a jabbing motion at Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan leaped at Maul. Their lightsabers clashed as Obi-Wan flipped over Maul's head and landed behind him. Keeping his eyes on Qui-Gon, Maul angled his lightsaber to block Obi-Wan's blade from behind, then ducked fast to evade Qui-Gon's sweeping blade.

Maul advanced toward Qui-Gon and spun, deflecting blows from both Jedi as the fight shifted across the hangar deck. Rapidly spinning his lightsaber, he anticipated their moves with

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ease. Having expected a greater challenge from Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan, he felt even more disgusted by them. But if the Jedi held no surprises in combat, Maul knew he had his Master to thank for that. If not for his Master, he never would have been a match for two Jedi at the same time.

Over the crashing noise of lightsabers, the destroyer droids' cannons, and the Naboo guards' blasters, Maul heard a starfighter's laser cannon firing across the hangar. He did not need the Force to be peripherally aware that the shots came from one remaining Naboo starfighter, which had just lifted off the deck and was now angling for the destroyer droids. He kept up his assault on the Jedi while the starfighter fired again and again, knocking out the destroyer droids' shields before shattering them completely. A moment later, the Queen and her group fled through a doorway, and then the Naboo starfighter soared out of the hangar.

Maul was not worried about the Queen. He would deal with her later. But for the moment, he was busy.

He kicked Qui-Gon in the chest so hard that he knocked the Jedi off his feet. He flipped away from Obi-Wan, flinging his body through the air to land before a doorway that led to Theed City's power generator. With one hand gripping his lightsaber, he reached out with the Force and seized a large piece of debris from one of the ruined destroyer droids, then launched it at the door's opening mechanism. The mechanism exploded in sparks and the door began to slide open.

Qui-Gon was already up and he rushed toward Maul, but Obi-Wan reached him first. Maul spun his lightsaber, deflecting his opponents' strikes as he backed through the open doorway. He launched a high kick that connected with Obi-Wan's jaw. As Obi-Wan fell back and rolled across the floor, Maul backed up, luring Qui-Gon toward the power generator. Obi-Wan got up fast and sprinted to rejoin the fight.

That's it. Come to me.

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Qui-Gon swung. Maul parried and swung back fast, clipping Qui-Gon's blade and then Obi-Wan's. The double-bladed lightsaber was a blur. Maul backed onto an inspection platform that was suspended high over the generator's deep shaft, and kicked off, backflipping to one of the many catwalks that spanned different levels in the shaft. Both Jedi leaped after him, and the fight proceeded along the catwalk.

Maul leered at the Jedi as he edged around a towering acceleration shaft that glowed brightly with plasma used to energize Theed City. With his lightsaber in constant motion, he kicked Obi-Wan straight off the catwalk. Before he could determine whether Obi-Wan had plummeted to his death, Qui-Gon struck and surprised Maul with a backhanded blow to the head that sent Maul over the catwalk's edge.

Maul did not cry out. He knew the shaft's central catwalk lay below him. He kept his lightsaber activated and held its pommel close to his chest as he landed hard on his back on the catwalk. The impact would have broken an ordinary man's back, but Maul was not by any means ordinary. He did feel pain, but as ever, the pain only fueled his rage.

He was still lying on his back as he saw Qui-Gon leaping from above. The Jedi landed close to him, and Maul had to move fast to block the Jedi's blade. Then Maul was up again, moving backward along the central catwalk. In the distance, beyond Qui-Gon's back, Maul sighted Obi-Wan clinging to the edge of a lower catwalk. Maul realized he didn't want Obi-Wan to fall, because that would deprive him of the pleasure of killing the young Jedi.

Maul leered again at Qui-Gon. *You think you're driving me back. You have no idea that I'm in control. You don't know where I'm taking you.*

The central catwalk terminated at the entrance of a security hallway that led to the generator's core. The hallway was protected by six consecutive laser doors that opened and locked shut in response to potentially lethal power outputs that occurred

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intermittently during the generator's plasma-activation process. As Maul lured Qui-Gon toward the hallway, he saw Obi-Wan leap up onto the central catwalk.

You'll both be dead soon.

Maul sensed the laser doors opening behind him. Qui-Gon was unrelenting in his ongoing attack, but Maul parried every blow. Qui-Gon swung at Maul's legs, but the blade swept under his feet as Maul jumped backward. Maul continued moving back, leading Qui-Gon into the hallway. They passed the first four security barriers before the doors activated and shut.

Transparent red curtains of pure energy, the doors would kill any life-form on contact. Maul was suddenly sealed in the passage between the fifth and sixth doors, and Qui-Gon between the fourth and fifth. Gazing past Qui-Gon, Maul saw Obi-Wan trapped between the first and second doors.

Facing Maul, Qui-Gon deactivated his lightsaber and dropped to one knee. Maul jabbed at the laser door that separated him from the Jedi, and succeeded only in producing a noisy flash. Maul deactivated his own weapon and watched the Jedi warily. He watched Qui-Gon take a deep breath and close his eyes.

He's...meditating?!

Keeping his eyes on the kneeling Jedi, Maul paced back and forth within his confined area of the hallway. He was baffled by the Jedi's mentality, the urge to meditate at such a moment, the desire to remain calm. The effort was so pointless. Glancing through the doors behind Qui-Gon, Maul saw that the worried-looking Obi-Wan had deactivated his own lightsaber. With his arms extended at his sides, Obi-Wan looked like a hopeless clod. Maul grinned.

They don't know the power of the dark side. But they will...when I slay them.

Minutes passed. And then the laser doors opened.

Maul and Qui-Gon activated their lightsabers at the same time. Qui-Gon sprang forward, Maul moved backward, and the fight resumed. Behind Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan raced up through the

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security hallway, but he had to stop fast when the sixth laser door activated, cutting him off from Qui-Gon.

Warding off Qui-Gon's attack with each backward step, Maul maneuvered around the circular mouth of the generator's core, a virtually fathomless pit. Maul sensed Qui-Gon was fighting without hatred, just as he sensed Obi-Wan's helplessness from behind the transparent laser door. He spun his lightsaber to deflect a rapid series of strikes from Qui-Gon's blade, then brought his own lightsaber up fast and slammed the side of its pommel against Qui-Gon's face, stunning the Jedi. And then, with a flick of his wrist, he drove one of his red blades straight through Qui-Gon's chest.

"No!"

The echoing shout came from Obi-Wan, who was still trapped behind the sixth laser door. Maul yanked the lightsaber free from Qui-Gon's torso and the Jedi collapsed beside the core.

Turning his back to Qui-Gon, Maul fixed his gaze on Obi-Wan. He deactivated his lightsaber and began pacing before the laser door, watching Obi-Wan as he waited for the door to open. He bared his teeth hungrily.

You're next.

When the door opened, Obi-Wan's lightsaber was blazing and so was Maul's. The young Jedi practically flew toward Maul. Their lightsabers smashed into each other. Maul spun and turned, flipping his lightsaber and forcing Obi-Wan to move that much faster with his inferior single-bladed weapon. Maul noticed that Obi-Wan was fighting more offensively than Qui-Gon, but it didn't matter. The boy would suffer the same fate as—

Obi-Wan's lightsaber came up fast and swept through the pommel of Maul's weapon. One half of Maul's lightsaber shattered, leaving his left hand clutching what amounted to a still-functional single blade. Before he could react, Obi-Wan kicked him in the chest and he was sent sprawling onto his back near the edge of the core.

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Obi-Wan leaped over Maul and tried to drive his lightsaber through Maul's prone body, but Maul blocked the strike and flung himself up from the floor. Obi-Wan landed behind Maul, but Maul turned and blocked another series of strikes before he kicked Obi-Wan in the jaw.

The Jedi moved with the kick, letting it carry him into a backflip. Landing on his feet, he struck back at Maul, driving them both away from the core. Maul flipped to the side and then used the power of the Force to shove Obi-Wan backward. Obi-Wan lost his grip on his lightsaber as he hit the floor. The lightsaber was still bouncing across the floor as he fell into the core.

Obi-Wan's lightsaber came to a stop. Maul grinned as he walked toward the weapon and then kicked it into the core. He leaned over the edge of the core to watch the lightsaber fall down the apparently bottomless hole. The lightsaber fell past Obi-Wan, who had managed to grab hold of a nub that jutted out from the core's upper wall, about two meters below the floor level.

Maul glared at Obi-Wan. He wondered how long the Jedi could cling to the nub. He knew Obi-Wan's hands and arms would get tired eventually. Growing impatient, Maul swung his pared-down lightsaber against the metal edge of the core's upper rim, sending sparks flying out over Obi-Wan's head. Maul noted that his blade did not damage the metal and realized it was impervious to energy weapons. He wondered if the metal could be crafted into body armor.

And then he noticed Obi-Wan was not looking up at him. The Jedi was staring at something along the core's upper wall. Or was he looking at something beyond the wall? Baffled by what the Jedi might be attempting, Maul scrunched his face angrily.

Obi-Wan flew up out of the core. Maul had forgotten about Qui-Gon Jinn's lightsaber, which flew up from the floor near the fallen Jedi's body and landed in the waiting hand of the still-airborne Obi-Wan.

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Maul rapidly transferred his lightsaber from his right hand to his left. Obi-Wan activated Qui-Gon's lightsaber as he soared overhead and landed behind Maul. Maul spun fast, but not fast enough to stop Obi-Wan from swinging Qui-Gon's blade through his midsection.

Maul grunted involuntarily as every nerve in his body went into shock. His vision blurred and he blinked his eyes, trying to regain his focus. He wanted to fight back. He wanted to slay Obi-Wan, but his body would not obey him. Obi-Wan slid out of his range of vision, and then Maul saw the chamber's ceiling. He realized he was falling backward into the core.

No.

And as he fell, the upper half of his body separated from the lower.

No.

As his remains tumbled down the generator shaft, he kept his eyes open and fought to remain conscious. But then his head struck the shaft's wall, and everything went dark.

No!

His mind screamed. Despite everything he had learned about death and duty from his Master, Maul knew he was not yet ready to die. Not after so many years of training, and with so much more to accomplish. Not so long as he still had so much hatred within him.

Obi-Wan ruined me!

He willed himself to see. A moment later, his vision returned. The shaft's walls were a disorienting blur. Across the shaft he sighted his own black-clad legs, scissoring lifelessly at the air as they fell. He struggled to right his torso so he could see downward.

Can't die!

He fell past an oval shadow, and then a similar shadow raced by, along with a whooshing sound.

Air vents.

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Maul hoped that there was at least one more vent below, that it would be large enough to accommodate his diminished body. He extended his arms, and his left hand's fingertips suddenly burned with friction as they brushed against the cylindrical wall.

Must live!

Hoping, wishing, praying for one more air vent...

Must kill Obi-Wan!

...he reached out with the Force.

Chapter Eighteen

“Far above...far above...we don’t know where we’ll fall,” muttered the creature as he used a broken bit of blackened bone to scratch a drawing onto the wall of his cavernous dwelling, his bare back warmed by the small fire he’d built. “Far above...what once was great is rendered small.” The drawing consisted of a pair of small silhouettes, a man’s upper body separated from his lower body, each half apparently descending between two vertical lines that indicated a deep chute.

The creature sighed. “Nowhere to go but down.”

More than a decade had passed since the skirmish that had become known as the Battle of Naboo. The creature that had once been Darth Maul moved on his spiderlike droid legs through a tunnel on the planet Lotho Minor. He still didn’t know how long he’d been in the tunnel, or how or when he’d arrived on such a dismal world. He still remembered nothing about his life before, when he lived aboveground. All he had left were his anger and his hunger.

“Falling, falling, falling.” He looked at his other drawings of small figures on the wall. Some figures were being tortured, others killed. Many were fighting with burning sticks. Some sticks were blue. Some were red. The creature liked the red sticks.

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No, not sticks. Sticks are wrong. Something else that cuts and burns like...

He heard something move in the upper levels, a slithering sound that he recognized as coming from the one who called himself Morley. Morley was a snakelike scavenger who should have kept his distance. *Stupid Morley.*

And then he heard footsteps. Someone was walking with Morley.

Someone very big. On two legs.

Lowering the bone he'd been using as a drawing stick, he kept to the shadows as he scurried up a wall, careful not to make a sound. Despite his damaged memories, he knew every crevice and foothold in the tunnels.

As he shifted his metal legs up toward the ceiling, he looked down and saw Morley's shadowy form slink into the dark chamber. Near Morley, another dark form shifted, a hulking humanoid. A small point of light radiated and moved across the area of the big man's chest.

Something glowing, something burns...

"He's going to get you!" Morley cried.

The big man spun around and moved away from Morley. Morley shouted, "He's going to eat you alive!"

The creature clinging to the ceiling did not know whether Morley was threatening him or encouraging him to make a feast of the big man. The creature didn't care. He descended fast and pounced on Morley.

"No!" Morley screamed. "Not me! Please, not me!"

The creature squeezed Morley's writhing body. He liked the sounds of Morley's screams and desperate gasps for breath, but not as much as he enjoyed the loud snapping of bones as he broke Morley's spine.

Now for the big man.

The creature spotted something glowing in the darkness, recognized it as the point of light he'd seen on the other

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intruder's chest. He lurched forward on his metal legs and was about to spring when the man ignited a long red stick.

Not a stick.

A red blade made of pure energy. It was familiar....

Mine!

The creature *knew* he had once owned the weapon, or one very much like it. He glared at the intruder, saw that the point of light against his chest was a small amulet that hung from a chain around his neck. The man's head was illuminated by the glowing red blade. His strong face was tattooed with jagged patterns, and horns extended from his skull.

A reflection?!

For unknown reasons, the creature thought of a boy floating outside a window.

Me? No! Not me!

Confused and outraged, the creature shrieked and launched himself at the intruder, slamming him against the wall. He grabbed for the weapon's handle but the intruder knocked him back. His six metal legs clattered as he tumbled across the floor, but he rolled up onto his tapered feet and lashed out again, punching and kicking. His fingers struck armor and powerful muscles. He barely noticed that the intruder was only trying to ward him off with the red blade, not strike him down.

He pried at the central grip, trying to yank the weapon from the intruder's grasp. He did not assume that the weapon housed separate components for each blade, his shattered mind not even comprehending the incredible technology. He just knew that it was familiar and deadly, and that he wanted it.

The weapon snapped in two, leaving the intruder holding one red blade and the creature with the other. And then they were fighting, the two blades clashing in the darkness. Their fight carried them through the cave, but then the intruder grunted and fell back.

"You, Darth Maul," the intruder said, "are who I've been searching for."

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Darth Maul?

"I thought you were dead. You are my kin."

Memories flickered in the creature's mind...in *Maul's* mind. He growled. "No!"

"We are brothers."

Maul shook his head. "You don't know," Maul snapped. "You don't know anything!"

The intruder placed his hand over his chest. "I know I am your blood."

Maul glared at the intruder. *I don't know you!* He tried to read the stranger's expression. *Sorry for me? Disgusted?* Maul's blood began to boil. The stranger was nothing to him, not even a threat. Sneering, he cast aside the weapon and retreated into the cave.

He clambered over junk and shoved aside rotting carcasses, making his way back to the fire he'd built. It was still burning. He crouched on the filthy floor, stared at the drawings on the walls, and began chanting, "Never never never never never..."

The hulking stranger followed Maul to the fire. Looking around, the stranger said with dismay, "This is where you live?"

Without looking at the stranger, Maul nodded in response. He picked up a nearby bone and began gnawing on it.

The stranger noticed the weird and violent drawings that decorated the walls. "How long have you lived here?"

Maul nipped at the bone, his eyes rolling back and forth madly as he replied, "Years and years and years and years."

"You are a powerful Sith," the stranger said solemnly. "The whole galaxy shook before your power. Do you remember?"

The whole galaxy?! Maul leered. "Always remember, always remember."

The stranger eyed the robotic apparatus beneath Maul's rib cage and said, "Your legs?"

"That scum took it," Maul said.

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The stranger seemed pleased by Maul's answer. "The Jedi...you remember." Taking a cautious step toward Maul, the stranger said, "I've brought a gift for you."

"For me?" Maul said with disbelief. "Food?"

"No. Something to regain your memory." He removed the glowing talisman from his neck and handed it to Maul.

Maul clutched at the talisman. Rocking back and forth on his robot legs, he began chanting.

The stranger leaned closer to Maul. "Brother, what are you saying?"

But Maul wasn't listening. His focus was on the talisman, which glowed increasingly brighter in his hand. And then his mind was flooded by fragmented memories.

My childhood...my training...my Master!

In his mind, he saw a young man.

Scum!

The man was a Jedi.

Jedi scum! What's his name?

He knew the man's name was Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Maul's eyes went wide. And then he collapsed.

Epilogue

The hulking man claimed his name was Savage Opress. Like Maul, he was a Zabrak. According to Opress, Talzin had transformed him into a monstrous warrior, endowed him with dark side powers, and given him the amulet and sent him in search of Maul. Maul had no recollection of the amulet, the talisman Talzin had brushed against his bloodied arm years earlier. He didn't remember anyone named Talzin.

When Opress's starship left the planet Lotho Minor, Maul was with him. Opress had plotted a course for Dathomir. He explained that they would find Talzin on Dathomir, that Talzin would help Maul. Maul didn't know why Talzin would help him, but he did know that he needed help.

Because now he knew the identity of the person who had transformed him into a monster. He knew the man was a Jedi named Obi-Wan Kenobi. If Opress and Talzin could help Maul, they might help him find Kenobi. But Maul also knew he was in bad shape, that what he could really use was a new set of legs.

And then he would make Kenobi pay.

He looked at Opress, who was seated behind the controls of the starship that was carrying them to the hyperspace jump point that would take them to Dathomir. Maul was not certain that

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Opress was his ally, let alone his brother. But Maul was willing to take a chance.

Maybe he's a reflection...maybe he's the boy outside the window.

Maul could only imagine what the future held, or whether he could trust the man who was bringing him to Dathomir. He hoped Opress was indeed his friend.

Everyone else could burn.

STAR WARS

THE RISE AND FALL OF
DARTH VADER

BY RYDER WINDHAM



For Ralph McQuarrie

Prologue

Darth Vader, the Dark Lord of the Sith, was dreaming.

In his dream, he saw his own dark form standing upon the open terrace that clung to the curved outer wall of Bast Castle, his private fortress on the planet Vjun. Freezing acidic rain pelted his helmet, and high winds tore at his black cloak with incredible fury, as if the weather itself was doing its best to kill him along with anything else that attempted to live on the barren world. And yet Vader felt more alive than he had in years.

Turning from the balcony, he entered a vaulted doorway, leaving a trail of wet bootprints on the corridor floor. The walls were lined with automated heating vents that dried his garments as he strode to the dimly illuminated observatory. Although few had ever treaded within his fortress, he was not surprised to find the young man who stood at the center of the domed-ceiling chamber.

The young man was Luke Skywalker.

Clad in form-fitting black clothes, Luke had his back to Vader as he examined a three-dimensional star map that was suspended in the air above a holoprojector. Vader recognized the map as the Coruscant Sector. Luke's arms hung at his sides, and Vader noticed that Luke's right hand, clad in a black glove, was almost touching the lightsaber clipped to his belt.

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A new lightsaber, Vader thought. And a new hand.

Silent as a shadow, Vader moved forward into the room.

Without acknowledging Vader, Luke raised his right arm into the holographic starfield. He moved his cybernetic fingers through the tiny, glittering orb that represented the planet Coruscant.

"The Emperor is dead," Luke said in a low voice. "All that was his is now yours."

"No, my son," Vader said. "The galaxy is *ours*."

Luke nodded and smiled. Vader was still facing Luke when a low, familiar voice muttered unexpectedly from behind, "You are both...wrong."

It was the voice of Emperor Palpatine. Vader saw Luke's expression become tense, but he did not turn to face the Emperor. Then the Emperor began to laugh.

A ring of fire erupted from the floor, surrounding Vader and cutting him off from Luke. Listening to his Master's cackle, Vader lowered his masked head and thought, *Why won't you die?*

The laughter continued. Luke said, "He *can't* be alive! Father, help me!"

Around Vader, the fire began to burn inward, moving closer toward his body. Behind his helmet, Vader tried to blot out the horrid laughter. *Why won't you ever die?*

But the laughter did not stop. Vader attempted to reach for his own lightsaber, but his arm suddenly felt like it was made of solid stone. The flames were now licking at his cloak and boots. The Emperor laughed louder. Luke began to scream.

Vader squeezed his eyes shut. He could smell fused circuits and roasting flesh.

WHY WON'T YOU EVER—?!

And then Vader awoke.

Darth Vader's eyes snapped open. Seated within his pressurized meditation chamber aboard his personal Super Star Destroyer, the *Executor*, his first waking thought was, *Jedi don't have nightmares*. This thought surprised him almost as much as the

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intensity of the imagery of Bast Castle. It had been over two decades since he had broken from the Jedi order to become a Sith Lord, and in all those years, he had not thought about whether Jedi had nightmares, or dreams for that matter. Not since the end of the Clone Wars.

Perhaps it was a premonition, Vader thought, as a vein pulsed against the left temple of his bare, horribly scarred head. He quickly rejected this notion. He knew a premonition when he had one, knew that it was more than just a trick of the imagination mixing with subconscious desires. The vision of his fortress had been something else.

Perhaps a warning, but from whom? Vader considered the possibility that the vision had been planted in his mind by a skilled telepath. The idea that he might have been violated made him angry, and his anger opened him to the dark side of the Force. Closing his eyes, he reached out with the Force and searched for signs of psychic energy trails that might lead to a telepathic invader. He found nothing, no one....

But the Emperor would not leave a trail.

Vader grimaced. A year had passed since his last encounter with Luke Skywalker on Cloud City, where he had revealed his identity to Luke and told him it was his destiny to destroy the Emperor. Vader suspected that the Emperor knew of this treachery, for the Emperor knew everything eventually. But even if the Emperor were aware of all that had transpired, Vader was certain he would not feel threatened. The Emperor was simply too powerful. And yet somehow, Vader sensed that the Emperor had nothing to do with his strange vision of Bast Castle.

Could it have been just a dream? Vader wasn't sure. After so many years without dreaming, he had forgotten what dreams were like.

Above his pale head, a retractable robotic arm held his helmet close against the spherical chamber's ceiling. Dedicated servos lowered the helmet over his head and locked it onto his collar's hermetic seal. As his damaged lungs exhaled through his armored

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suit's life-support system, a deep hiss was emitted from his triangular respiratory vent.

The upper half of the meditation chamber lifted, exposing Vader like a black pistil at the center of a white mechanical flower. His seat rotated, allowing him to face a wide viewscreen, which flicked on to display the image of Admiral Piett on the *Executor's* bridge.

Vader said, "Status report."

"The *Executor* is prepared to leave Coruscant's orbit," Piett replied, standing at attention in his gray uniform. Although his voice was alert, his eyes appeared tired from staring at sensor screens and navigational monitors. "I await your command."

"Set course for the Endor system," Vader said.

"As you wish, my lord." Piett's image vanished from the viewscreen.

It was definitely not a dream, Vader convinced himself without difficulty. *Dreams are for pathetic life-forms*. He stared at his own reflection on the surface of the viewscreen.

I am the nightmare.

With an imperceptible gesture, he reset the viewscreen to display the starfield that lay directly before the *Executor's* bow. As he gazed at the distant stars on the screen, a deeply buried memory pushed its way into his consciousness. It was the memory of a wish, a wish to visit every star in the galaxy. But that wish, and the dreams that went with it, had belonged to someone else, a child who lived a long time ago and was no more.

Those were the dreams of a boy named Anakin Skywalker.

Chapter One

Anakin Skywalker was dreaming.

In the dream, he was an older boy, but still years away from manhood. He was inside the open cockpit of a small repulsorlift vehicle, soaring over rocky terrain at an incredibly high speed. Two strong cables were secured to a parallel pair of long engines in front of the vehicle, and the gap between the engines was bridged by an arc of crackling energy. Anakin had never seen such a strange contraption, but somehow he knew how to handle it. As he pressed against a throttle lever and plunged into a high-walled ravine, he realized, *I'm a pilot!*

He wasn't alone. Several similar vehicles swerved through the ravine in front of him, and the noise of their engines, echoing off the rocky walls, was almost deafening.

It's a race!

With fearless precision, Anakin accelerated and whipped past the other vehicles. Out of the corners of his eyes, he caught fleeting glimpses of his competition. Most were aliens he'd never seen before, but they all had alert, determined expressions and nimble fingers. Anakin had dreamed of other worlds before, but never anyplace like this.

Launching out of the ravine, Anakin led the other racers across a wide expanse of desert flats. Twin suns blazed in the sky,

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baking the hard sand so that the rising heat shimmered in the air and made distant rock formations appear to float above the planetary surface. In the distance, he sighted an enormous, open arena that was ringed by crowded grandstands and dome-topped towers. He knew the finish line was in that arena. Tightening his grip on the controls, he thought, *I'm going to win!*

Suddenly, his left engine began to shudder, violently jolting the cable that linked the engine to his vehicle. Anakin was struggling to maintain control when his right engine let out a loud whine, then both engines began to nose toward the ground. Anakin squirmed in his cockpit and cried, "NO!"

"It's all right, Ani," said his mother's voice.

And then Anakin Skywalker woke up.

The shuddering sensation and loud whine of an engine continued as Anakin opened his eyes. He was huddled beside his mother on a hard metal bench in a space freighter's cargo compartment, which was separated from the noisy engine room by a crisscross of metal bars. The cargo hold was tightly packed with thirty other beings, aliens as well as humans; those who didn't have a seat on one of the four long benches either stood or crouched on the filthy floor.

Anakin looked up to his mother's pale, grime-covered face and said, "We're landing?"

"It feels like we are," Shmi Skywalker answered with a smile. She gently pushed Anakin's blond hair back from his forehead and gazed into his blue eyes. "You had a bad dream?"

Anakin thought for a moment, then said, "Not too bad." He wished the cargo hold had some kind of a window, or even a small viewscreen so he could see what was going on outside. "Know where we're going yet?"

"Not yet."

Before they had boarded the freighter, a crewman had explained that only paying passengers were allowed to know their destination in advance, and all others—for security reasons—

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would just have to wait. Shmi had hoped to make Anakin feel better about the situation by reminding him that she always liked surprises, but he sensed she was scared. She took his little hand in hers and said, “Just hold tight.”

When the freighter stopped shaking and the engine’s whine began to die, the cargo hold’s occupants shifted out of their seats and up from the floor. Standing beside his mother while she strapped the ragged bag that contained their few belongings to her back, Anakin wished he were taller so he wouldn’t feel so crushed between all the adult bodies. He also wished for some fresh air, as the hold’s single refresher had backed up and everyone, including himself, smelled awful. They’d been waiting for several minutes for the exit hatch to open when Shmi looked down at Anakin and said, “Do you want me to carry you?”

Anakin’s legs weren’t tired, but he nodded.

Moving carefully to avoid bumping the surrounding people, Shmi lifted her son and held him close against her chest. As he wrapped his small arms around her neck, he said, “Thanks.”

“You’re getting big,” she told him. “It won’t be long before you’ll be carrying me.”

“Really?”

Shmi laughed. “Don’t worry, you’re not growing *that* fast.”

An older woman standing behind Shmi smiled at Anakin and asked, “How old are you?”

Anakin smiled back and held up three fingers. In fact, he wasn’t certain that he was three years old, but he didn’t want to admit that he didn’t know.

The hatch finally opened and the compartment was instantly flooded by a blast of hot, dry air. Even those who had been eager to leave the cramped cargo hold were suddenly reluctant to walk down the ramp that led outside. The heat reminded Anakin of his dream. Moving his lips close to his mother’s ear, he whispered, “Twin suns.”

Before Shmi could ask what he was talking about, a voice from below shouted, “Come on, move it out!”

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The people filed out of the freighter. They found themselves on a sandy stretch of land near a cluster of domed, low-level adobe structures. Air traffic indicated they had landed at the outskirts of a fairly busy spaceport. A few pedestrians were visible in the distance, moving slowly and keeping to the shade of the windowless buildings in an effort to avoid the blistering heat.

“Welcome back to Mos Espa, O mighty Gardulla,” a voice bellowed in thick Huttese. Anakin, still carried by his mother, turned his head to see the speaker was a green-skinned male Rodian who stood at the bottom of the ramp that extended from the freighter’s main hatch. While the Rodian made a sweeping bow, Gardulla the Hutt, the massive sluglike alien who had chartered the freighter, descended on a repulsorsled that glided down the ramp from the freighter’s main hatch. Gardulla immediately began issuing orders to her attendants. Anakin knew enough Huttese to comprehend that Gardulla was eager to see something called a Podrace.

Shmi set Anakin down on the ground. He squinted up at the sky and said, “See, Mom? Told you.”

Shmi followed his gaze to the two suns overhead, and then she understood what he’d said moments earlier. “*Twin suns*. Yes, I see.”

Anakin wanted to tell his mother about the dream he’d had, but they had to remain quiet as one of Gardulla’s attendants, a long-necked Anx, began to bark out instructions. The Anx pointed to Anakin, Shmi, and six other people, and said, “You’ll be sharing living quarters at Gardulla’s estate, here in Mos Espa. Before you’re escorted there, be aware your implanted transmitters have been set for—”

Anakin was wondering if *living quarters* meant more than one room when the Anx was interrupted by the loud report of a blaster pistol that sounded like it came from the nearby adobe buildings. At the sound of the shot, Anakin stood still while everyone else near the freighter flinched, ducked, or dived for cover behind the few cargo containers that had already been

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removed from the ship. Shmi threw her body protectively in front of her son, but he pushed his arms out, pressing away from her so he could see what was happening.

A reptilian humanoid bolted out from an alley between two adobe buildings and ran toward the freighter. As it drew closer, Anakin saw the runner was a lean Arcona with an anvil-shaped head and clear, marblelike eyes. A metal fetter with a long, broken chain was secured to the Arcona's right ankle, making a jangling sound as it whipped behind his running feet. A moment later, two blaster-wielding men jumped from the alley, and Anakin realized the Arcona was running for his life.

Seeing the men with blasters about to shoot in the direction of the freighter, Gardulla's Anx attendant bellowed in Huttese, "Hold your fire, you fools!" Then he pointed a long, pointed finger at the fleeing Arcona and yelled to Gardulla's guards, "Stop him!"

The guards spread out quickly. Without breaking his pace, the Arcona elbowed a guard aside and dodged another. Anakin could see that the Arcona was trying to get away from his pursuers, but he had no idea where the Arcona was trying to go. Except for some low dunes, the surrounding land was almost entirely flat, with no other ships or vehicles in sight. *Nowhere to hide*, Anakin thought.

The Arcona's frightened eyes flicked toward Anakin, and the boy held his gaze. Anakin felt sorry for the Arcona and wished he could help. Then one of Gardulla's guards lunged forward and the Arcona sprinted away, moving past Anakin and the others. He was about two meters away from Anakin when his body erupted in a small explosion.

Anakin blinked as the Arcona's remains fell to the ground. He turned quickly to look at the two men who had chased the Arcona away from the buildings. Neither man had fired a blaster. Anakin was observant enough to realize that the Arcona had not been shot, and that some explosive device had detonated within him.

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Shmi pulled Anakin close to her side and said, “Look away, Ani.”

Anakin ignored her and kept his eyes on what was left of the Arcona. A few of the guards and the Anx attendant walked over to inspect the smoldering mess. Noticing Anakin, the Anx turned his long, pointed chin to the boy and said, “That’s what happens to slaves who try to escape on Tatooine.”

Anakin felt his throat become painfully dry. No matter how often his mother reminded him that there were less fortunate beings in the galaxy, there was no denying the fact that they were both slaves, the property of Gardulla the Hutt.

Tatooine, thought Anakin. *Welcome to Tatooine.*

Chapter Two

Slavery was illegal throughout Republic space, but the planet Tatooine was in the galaxy's Outer Rim Territories, where the laws of the Republic rarely applied.

Shmi Skywalker had been a slave almost her entire life, ever since space pirates captured her family during a space voyage. Separated from her parents at a young age, she had changed owners many times. One former master, Pi-Lippa, had been kind and had taught Shmi valuable technical skills. Though Pi-Lippa had planned to free Shmi, she'd died before she could, and Shmi instead became the property of one of Pi-Lippa's relatives, who did not want to free her.

Before coming into Gardulla's ownership, Shmi had given birth to Anakin. Shmi could not explain Anakin's conception—there had been no father—but she accepted him as the greatest gift she could have ever received.

In the months that followed his arrival on Tatooine, Anakin kept his eyes and ears open. He eavesdropped on conversations between Gardulla's attendants, guards, and other slaves, and watched carefully when mechanics and technicians came to repair or replace sand-fouled machinery. He wanted to learn everything he could about the desert world, its inhabitants, and their

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technologies, because he believed such knowledge might be the only way he and his mother would ever find freedom.

And so he learned about the early colonists of Tatooine, the miners whose search for valuable minerals ended as an astronomically expensive disappointment. Some of the miners chose to remain on the desert world while others were simply stranded. One of the first human settlements was at a place called Fort Tusken, which was assaulted by Tatooine's indigenous humanoids, the nomadic Sand People, who subsequently became known as Tusken Raiders. Favoring traditional club and ax weapons, Sand People wore head-concealing sandproof masks, and heavy cloaks that protected them from the elements and helped them blend in with the landscape. Sand People never adapted to easy contact with settlers, and were reputed to be as ferocious as they were mysterious. Anakin had yet to see them, but had been told that it was their howls he sometimes heard after darkness fell. He found them bloodcurdling.

Tatooine's other significant natives were the Jawas, diminutive beings with glowing eyes who salvaged the miners' enormous abandoned vehicles to scavenge the desert for any scrap of metal or bit of junk that they could transform into goods for sale or trade. Although Jawas were almost as malodorous as a backed-up refresher, Anakin looked forward to their visits to Gardulla's estate because he learned a great deal by watching them work. Much to the amazement of the other slaves and a few attendants, Anakin quickly gained a reputation for being able to fix discarded appliances.

As for Gardulla, Anakin learned that she competed with an even larger Hutt, named Jabba, over control of various enterprises on Tatooine. Anakin also discovered that Gardulla fed those who displeased her to a monstrous krayt dragon that she kept in a pit beneath her fortresslike palace off Mos Espa Way, and that she was addicted to betting on the Podraces. Anakin was in no hurry to meet any krayt dragons, but he was intrigued by everything he heard about the dangerous, high-speed

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sport that involved a pair of repulsorlift engines tethered to an open-cockpit vehicle. The first time he overheard two of Gardulla's attendants discussing the design of a Podracer they'd seen, he remembered the dream he'd had just before he arrived on Tatooine. According to the attendants, Podracing was the biggest attraction in Mos Espa, and it drew crowds from all over the galaxy. Anakin wondered if he'd ever get to watch a Podrace.

A few months after his arrival to Mos Espa, Anakin was helping a late-model droid mechanic repair a portable vaporator near the estate's main entrance when a winged, pudgy-bellied Toydarian with a flexible trunklike nose flew into the courtyard. Seeing the boy, the Toydarian paused, hovering in the air, and examined Anakin's handiwork. Speaking in Huttese, the Toydarian said in a low, wheezy voice, "You put in that water pump unit the wrong way."

Anakin had been told not to talk with strangers, but he cautiously replied, "I rigged it." Seeing that the Toydarian seemed genuinely interested, he demonstrated the pump mechanism and added, "I made it work better."

The Toydarian's eyes went wide as he watched the pump in fluid operation. "Hmm...who showed you how to rig it?"

"Nobody," Anakin said. His mother had told him not to brag, but he could not help feeling proud. "I just...I figured it out. My mom can fix things too."

"Is that so?" The Toydarian lowered himself in the air to examine the unit more closely. "You're not bad with your hands, kid," he said. "Not bad at all."

Anakin bowed his head slightly and said, "Thank you, sir."

"I have an appointment with Gardulla," the Toydarian said. Then he winked and rubbed his clawed fingers together and added, "A matter of money!"

Anakin didn't know how to respond to that, but just then, Gardulla herself heaved her bulky body into the entrance and said, "Ready to pay up, Watto?"

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“Maybe, maybe,” the Toydarian said as he hovered toward Gardulla. “But the next race is tomorrow, and I have an idea for another bet...”

Anakin watched the Toydarian follow Gardulla into the main building, then went back to work on the vaporator.

Gardulla lost her bet with Watto.

Two days later, Anakin and Shmi had a new owner.

When Watto wasn't gambling, he ran one of the most successful parts dealerships in Mos Espa. He had need for someone with Anakin's mechanical aptitude, and had plenty of work for Shmi, too. Both mother and son were grateful to Watto for keeping them together, and after sharing a dingy, fetid room with six other slaves at Gardulla's estate, they were astonished to learn they would have an entire hovel to themselves at Slave Quarters Row, along the outskirts of Mos Espa. Watto believed they *should* feel grateful, and made it clear that if they didn't do as he said, he'd fill the hovel to capacity with additional slaves.

As days turned into weeks and months became years, Anakin made the best of his time, learning all that he could about technology and interstellar travel. He studied the aliens who passed through Mos Espa and got to know the local merchants on a first-name basis. While sitting in junked starship cockpits, he learned to recognize the controls for thrusters, stabilizers, and repulsors. From watching other mechanics and pit droids, he became proficient at repairing Podracers at Watto's shop.

By age seven, he began to secretly salvage bits and pieces to restore a junked Podracer cockpit and a pair of Radon-Ulzer 620C engines that he hoped to transform into his very own Podracer. He kept this project under the cover of an old tarp in an area of the common refuse dump in back of the slave housing, where Watto never ventured, and deliberately kept the Podracer looking like it would never run. If Watto ever found out about it, he would dismiss it as just some childish project.

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Watto *did* catch Anakin taking a refurbished Podracer for a test spin around the junkyard, but the Toydarian's fury died when he realized how well the boy handled the vehicle. Like Gardulla, Watto was addicted to gambling on Podraces, and he could hardly believe his good fortune, to own a slave who might generate revenue at the racetrack. Despite Anakin's age and species, he was tested and soon qualified to become a Podrace pilot. Much to his mother's horror, he eventually began competing under Watto's sponsorship.

Watto never stopped threatening to buy more slaves, but Anakin and his mother continued to have the hovel for themselves. Watto even gave Shmi an aeromagnifier that she could use to clean computer memory devices, allowing her to bring in a modest income. Despite these advantages, Anakin did not give up on his dreams of freedom. He began thinking of making some kind of a scanner to locate the transmitter implanted in his body, even though he wasn't sure how such a transmitter might be deactivated or removed.

At some point, while listening to spacers talk of faraway worlds, he became aware of the Jedi Knights, the powerful peacekeepers of the Galactic Republic, who used lightsabers: a handheld weapon that emitted a lethal, truncated laser beam. Despite his limited knowledge of the Jedi, he sometimes had dreams of becoming one. Anakin wondered if any Jedi had ever heard of Tatooine, or if any had been born into slavery.

By age nine, he was resigned to the fact that he wasn't leaving Tatooine any time soon.

Still, every night, lying in the darkness of his small room that was cluttered with his various homemade devices and scientific projects, he vowed: *I won't be a slave forever.*

Chapter Three

“How’s your Podracer coming along, Ani?” his friend Kitster asked as he stepped over a rusted landspeeder turbine in Watto’s junkyard.

Anakin shot a startled look at the dark-haired boy. “Keep your voice down!” Anakin said in a low voice. “You want Watto to find out?”

Kitster lowered his own voice and said, “Sorry, I forgot. How long have you been working on it?”

“Almost two years,” Anakin admitted as he picked up a worn gasket.

“You really think it’ll fly?”

“Once I get a few more parts, sure it will,” Anakin said, tossing the gasket aside. “Problem is, if I fly it, Watto will know I *have* it, and then he’ll want to take it from me. I’ll just have to keep it a secret, and keep flying *his* cruddy Pods.”

“I’d like to try flying a Podracer someday,” Kitster said wistfully.

“Maybe you will.” Anakin didn’t want to hurt Kitster’s feelings, but he knew that his friend wouldn’t last five seconds in a Podrace. Operating a Podracer required incredibly fast reflexes, the competition was fierce, and Anakin—as far as anyone knew—was the only human ever to fly one and live. Despite this

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accomplishment, Anakin knew he'd have to do better to please Watto. In the more than half-dozen races he had competed in so far, he had crashed twice and failed to finish even once. The biggest challenge he had was dealing with Sebulba, the gangly, crook-legged, antagonistic Dug, who won often and cheated almost constantly. Sebulba never hesitated to force competitors off the course, and had caused more than a dozen pilots to crash in the past year alone. Anakin thought, *If it weren't for that cheat, I'd have won by now!*

Kitster asked, "Think you'll win the next race?"

Anakin shrugged. "I'd be happy just to make it to the finish."

Anakin turned to another pile of metal, and found himself looking at a pair of slotted lenses that were surrounded by multicolored wires contained within a skull-shaped metal armature. Strangely, the lenses seemed to be staring back at him, and he realized they were burned-out photoreceptors. "Hey, Kitster!" he said as he picked up the object. "Look what I found!"

"What is it?"

"A droid head!" Anakin said, brushing sand from the vocoder plate beneath the photoreceptors, which had served as the droid's eyes. "And not a pit droid's either!" The head's metal plating had been removed, and the exposed photoreceptors had a surprised, wide-eyed expression. He handed the head to Kitster.

"It's pretty beat up," Kitster observed. "Maybe it was some kind of war droid?"

"I don't think so," Anakin said as he looked around, hoping to find some other droid parts. "The metal's pretty thin—Oh, WOW!" His gaze had fallen on what appeared to be the decapitated head's skeletal body, which lay in a tangled heap beside a pile of discharged fuel cells. Like the head, the body was without plating, but Anakin was delighted just the same. "The whole structural framework's there! You know what this *means*, don't you?"

Kitster thought hard. "Umm, no."

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"It means I can build my own—"

"Boy!" Watto's voice interrupted, calling from beyond the arched portal that separated the junkyard from his bell-shaped shop. "Boy! Where in this dump are you?!"

"Oh, no!" Anakin said, glancing at Kitster and then back to the archway. "Wait here!" Trying hard to maintain a relaxed expression, he trotted out of the junkyard.

"Ah! There you are!" Watto said when he sighted Anakin. Hovering outside the entrance of his shop, he spoke in Huttese, "For a moment, I suspected you'd run away from Watto."

"Oh, and give you the pleasure of seeing my transmitter detonate?"

"Pleasure?" Watto said, his trunklike nose turning slightly upward as if recoiling from Anakin's words. "You think I like cleaning up exploded slaves? Bweh heh heh!" When he was done laughing, he gestured with a three-fingered hand to some more scrap-filled containers that had just been delivered, and said, "Now get back to work! I want this scrap sorted by noon!"

After Anakin had hauled the containers into the junkyard, he returned to where he'd left Kitster with the droid parts.

"You're not telling Watto about the droid?" Kitster asked.

"I found him. He's mine," Anakin said as he began dragging the droid's body into an area shaded by large metal refuse, where Watto was unlikely to notice it. "Besides, Watto wouldn't be able to fix him. I'll smuggle him back home, piece by piece."

Handing the droid's head to Anakin, Kitster said, "But even if you get him to work, what'll you use him for?"

"Lots of things. Running errands. Lifting stuff....Hey, what's this?" He had found a line of small engraved lettering at the base of the droid's skull, and he held the head out so Kitster could see it too. "Says here he's a *Cybot Galactica Protocol Droid*."

"Protocol? What's that good for?"

"I don't know," Anakin admitted. "I'll have to ask my mom. Hey, maybe he'll even help me and my mom leave Tatooine!" Holding the droid's head in both hands, Anakin studied its

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mechanisms more closely. “The balance gyro’s ancient. I’m guessing seventy or eighty years old. I’ll bet he saw a lot of action. Makes you wonder...how did he wind up like this?”

Anakin gazed into the droid’s burnt-out eyes as if he might find more clues to the droid’s history there. But he saw only the droid’s frozen, startled expression. *Don’t worry, pal*, Anakin thought. *I’ll take good care of you.*

It took five days of stealthy maneuvers for Anakin to move the droid’s remains from the junkyard to his hovel. Except for Kitster, he told no one about the droid. But he should have told at least one other person: his mother, who was *not* happy to enter the hovel and find her son’s latest project laid out in hundreds of dirty pieces on the dining table.

Shmi had bought a small sack of dried vegetables at the market, and she placed them on the kitchen counter. Not wanting to look at the bizarre metal and wire skeleton that lay in a supine position on the table with its dead eyes staring at the ceiling, she averted her gaze from Anakin and the droid. “Let me guess,” she said. “You *found* it?”

“Yeah, pretty lucky, huh? And...well, I don’t know anyone else in Mos Espa who’d be able to fix him up right. If I hadn’t saved him from the scrap heap, he might have wound up smelted!” When Shmi didn’t respond, Anakin felt compelled to add, “He’s a *protocol* droid, Mom. Do you know what that is?”

Shmi took a deep breath and turned around to face Anakin. “Protocol droids speak millions of languages. They’re used as translators. By diplomats.”

“Oh,” Anakin said. He could tell by the tone of his mother’s voice that she thought they would have no use for a protocol droid. Hoping to convince her otherwise, he continued, “Oh! That’s...that’s great! He’ll be *really* useful at the market if we want to trade with a merchant who doesn’t speak Basic. And...and just imagine how impressed visitors will be when he greets them at the door! I’m sure he’ll be good at helping us in lots of other ways too.”

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Shmi returned her attention to the vegetables.

"He'll need new photoreceptors," Anakin said. "I think I can find some at Watto's shop."

"You're being careless, Ani," Shmi said with concern. "Watto will be enraged if he learns you've taken an entire droid."

"But I *had* to do it, Mom! The moment I saw all the parts were there, I just knew I had to put him back together." Anakin gently gripped the droid's right forearm and lifted it up from the table, testing the flexibility of the elbow joint. "Looking at him, all torn up and busted...it just made me so sad. If protocol droids are good with languages and translating, I'll bet he was really smart." Anakin looked at the droid's face again. "I'd also bet he didn't have a friend in the galaxy. Why else would he end up in a scrap heap on Tatooine?"

"Maybe it talked too much," Shmi said.

"Aw, Mom. You'll hurt his feelings."

"The droid is a machine, Ani. It doesn't have feelings."

"How do you know?" Anakin said, unable to keep the hurt from his voice. "Maybe his owners were mean to him and didn't care what happened to him. Maybe he tried to escape. Maybe...he was just like us."

Shmi felt Anakin's sorrow, and thought of the slave that had died while trying to escape five days earlier. She turned to her son, put her hands on his shoulders, and said, "Promise me, Ani. When you...*find* a new pair of photoreceptors for our new friend...you won't get caught."

"You mean, I can keep him?"

Shmi nodded as she surveyed the droid. "It's clear to me now. You were meant to help this droid. You're his second chance."

"Thanks, Mom!" Anakin said as he hugged his mother. "When I get him to talk, I'll tell him to thank you too!"

"No, Ani. After all, *you'll* be his maker. Just remember, the droid is your responsibility. And unless you're prepared to care for something, you don't deserve to have it."

"I won't forget," Anakin said.

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“And one more thing,” Shmi added in a severe tone.

“Yes, Mom?”

“I want the droid off our dining table right *now*.”

Chapter Four

The next race did not go well for Anakin. Flying a Podracer owned by Watto, he was neck-and-neck with Sebulba—when the cheating Dug flashed his Pod’s thrusters at Anakin’s cockpit, nearly smashing him into the area of the racecourse known as Metta Drop. Anakin survived, but he crashed Watto’s Pod, damaging both engines. Watto was furious, and Shmi made it clear to Anakin that she didn’t want him to race anymore, even if Watto decided he wanted Anakin to compete again.

A little more than a week after the crash, Anakin had his protocol droid’s intelligence and communications processors up and running. Although the droid had no memory of how he arrived on Tatooine, he counted Jawa and Tusken among the six million languages he spoke. The droid uttered clipped sentences in a well-mannered voice, but for some reason didn’t always know when to *stop* talking. He also worried a lot. Anakin named the droid C-3PO, choosing the number three because he considered the droid the third member of his family after his mother and himself. C-3PO was still without metal coverings and had only a single working eye, but when Watto instructed Anakin to take a speeder loaded with scrap metal and other goods to the Dune Sea to do some trading with the Jawas, Anakin decided to

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secretly bring the droid along for the four-standard-hours round-trip.

Anakin and C-3PO met the Jawas in the shadow of the sandcrawler beside Mochot Steep, a singular rock formation about halfway across the Dune Sea. C-3PO proved to be a capable translator by helping Anakin negotiate with the Jawas, who were sometimes known to barter damaged goods. When the trading was done, Anakin had acquired two mechanic droids, three serviceable multipurpose droids, and a damaged hyperdrive converter that needed only minor repairs.

Heading back to Mos Espa, Anakin was guiding the droid-loaded speeder through the Xelric Draw, a shallow, widemouthed canyon near the edge of the Dune Sea, when he sighted something. It was a shadowy shape that seemed out of place at the base of the rocky canyon's walls. As Anakin veered toward the area that had attracted his attention, C-3PO became nervous and fixed his one working eye on his maker.

"Master Anakin, whatever are you doing?" C-3PO said with concern. "Mos Espa is down the canyon draw, not through the side of the—oh, my! Is that what I think it is?" C-3PO had sighted the shape too, and because he'd learned about the more dangerous life-forms on Tatooine, he didn't like what he saw. "Master, there is every reason to turn right around—"

"I know," Anakin interrupted. "I just want a look."

Anakin brought the speeder to a stop near the cliff wall. A pile of rocks rested below the wall, and under the rocks lay a motionless, humanoid body, with one leg pinned beneath a large boulder. The body wore a tan robe, leather gloves, and boots. It was sprawled facedown, head turned to one side, allowing Anakin to see the cloth-wrapped head, its face concealed by goggles and a breath mask. A long, dual-handled blaster rifle lay about a meter away from one outstretched arm.

Anakin had heard enough about Tusken Raiders to know what they looked like. But he'd never seen one up close before.

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From the speeder, Anakin surveyed the cliff wall's gouged, broken surface. He easily imagined that the Tusken had been hiding somewhere above when the rocks that had supported him gave way, sending him crashing to the canyon floor. Anakin climbed out of the speeder for a closer look.

C-3PO's skeletal form trembled. "Master Anakin, I don't think this is a good idea at all!"

As Anakin approached, the Tusken stirred, raising his head to look at Anakin, then lowered his head again.

He's still alive! From everything Anakin had heard about Tusken, he knew it would be best to leave immediately. If he stuck around, more Tusken might arrive. If he was late getting back to Mos Espa or failed to return with the droids and speeder, Watto would be furious. As C-3PO protested behind him, Anakin thought of his mother. He knew she'd be worried, but he wondered, *Would she tell me to get out of here too? What would she say, if she were here?*

"Threepio," he called to the nervous droid, "bring the other droids over here."

It took the combined strength of the various droids and the weight of the speeder to rig a lever that could tilt the boulder enough so Anakin could pull the now-unconscious Tusken free. Taking supplies from the speeder's medical kit, Anakin applied a quick-seal splint to freeze the Tusken's injured leg, which was broken in several places.

Tatooine's suns began to set. Anakin knew he'd never reach Mos Espa by nightfall, and he didn't want to risk traveling across the desert in the darkness. After doing his best to conceal the speeder and the newly purchased droids under the lee of a cliff face, Anakin sat beside C-3PO. Illuminated by a small glow unit they'd removed from the speeder, they were watching the Tusken Raider when he awoke. The Tusken lay on the sand, staring at Anakin through the opaque lenses of his goggles, then

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slowly raised himself to sit upright, taking care not to shift his injured leg.

“Uh, hello,” Anakin said, hoping his voice sounded friendly.

The Tusken did not respond.

“Are you thirsty?”

Again, no response.

C-3PO leaned his one-eyed head closer to Anakin and said in a low voice, “I don’t think he likes us very much.”

The Tusken’s head turned slightly. Anakin realized the Tusken had spotted his own blaster rifle, which Anakin had propped against some rocks beyond the Tusken’s reach. Then the Tusken returned his gaze to Anakin.

Several minutes later, the Tusken spoke. Anakin didn’t understand the snarled words, so he turned to C-3PO. The droid translated, “He wants to know what you are going to do with him, Master Anakin.”

Confused, Anakin looked back at the Tusken. “Tell him I’m not going to do anything with him. I’m just trying to help him get well.”

The Tusken didn’t reply, but Anakin sensed he was afraid. Because nearly everyone believed Tusken Raiders to be fearless, Anakin was surprised. *Why’s he afraid of me? I’m not afraid of him.* Then Anakin thought with some surprise, *I’m not afraid of anything.*

But as Anakin stared at the Tusken’s masked face, he saw his own reflection in the lenses of the Tusken’s goggles, and shuddered slightly. He had heard that Tusken never took off their masks or bared their flesh, and the thought of his entire body being so completely enveloped, sealed off so that he’d be unable to feel anything—*not even the touch of my mother’s hand*—made Anakin suddenly realize a painful truth: Although he was never afraid for himself, he was sometimes very afraid for his mother.

What if I were to lose her? How brave would I be then?

Anakin continued watching the Tusken until he fell asleep.

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Anakin Skywalker had many dreams that night. In one dream, he was no longer nine years old. He was a man. And not just any man, but a Jedi Knight with a lightsaber.

He ran through the streets of Mos Espa, looking for the few slavers who'd escaped him. His mission was to liberate all the slaves on Tatooine. For too long, slavers in the Outer Rim had believed themselves immune from the laws of the Galactic Republic. Anakin was going to change all that. He called out, "Release the slaves now and no harm will come to you!"

In the buildings that lined the streets of Mos Espa, some tenants leaned out of their windows and cheered for Anakin. Even though he'd deactivated his lightsaber's blade, most of the slavers were scared by the sight of him and his weapon, and surrendered when they saw him. Anakin gave them some credit for knowing better than to take on a Jedi.

A shadow snaked across the curved exterior of a nearby building. By the angle of the shadow, Anakin quickly determined that it was cast by a humanoid alien from atop a neighboring building's roof. From above and behind, Anakin heard the click of a blaster's safety mechanism being switched off. He thought, *Aha! A slaver who doesn't know better!*

Anakin's lightsaber ignited with a loud hum as he spun to look up at the roof, just in time to see the alien squeeze his blaster's trigger. Before the fired laserbolt could reach Anakin's chest, he swung hard with his lightsaber and smashed the bolt back at his attacker. The alien clutched at his shoulder and fell from the roof, landing with a loud thud on the sand-covered street. The dust was still settling when Anakin heard a woman's voice calling his name.

Anakin turned to see the woman. It was his mother, dressed in her rough work clothes. Anakin deactivated his lightsaber and said, "I came back, Mom! Like I promised! You're free!"

His mother smiled and opened her arms to Anakin. He ran to embrace her, but before he could reach her, she vanished. He

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was still clutching at the air where she'd been standing when he was suddenly surrounded by Sand People.

Anakin awoke with a start. Just as they had appeared in his dream, a group of Sand People now encircled him, silhouetted against the predawn sky. They carried blaster rifles and long gaffi sticks, double-edged axlike weapons made from metal scavenged from wrecked or abandoned vehicles. Anakin was completely at their mercy.

As he wondered what the Sand People would do to him, Anakin heard a guttural muttering from nearby. Beyond the group that stood around him, more Sand People were lifting and carrying away the Tusken that he'd rescued. The injured Tusken was the one who'd spoken, and his words caused the other Tusken to slowly back away from Anakin.

Within seconds, all the Sand People were gone, leaving Anakin unharmed. *Maybe they were grateful to me for helping their friend. Maybe the Tusken aren't so awful after all.*

"Master Anakin, they've gone!" C-3PO cried as he stepped away from his position beside the speeder, where he'd been hiding. "Oh, we're lucky to be alive! Thank goodness they didn't harm you!"

Anakin stood up and looked around. The speeder and the other droids were where he'd left them, but the injured Tusken's blaster rifle was gone. The only evidence of his encounter with the Sand People was the depleted contents of the speeder's medical kit and their footprints in the sand.

It's almost like the whole thing never happened.

As the twin suns began to rise and the stars faded from the brightening sky, Anakin decided it was time to head home.

His return to Mos Espa went as Anakin expected. After he'd snuck C-3PO back to Slave Quarters Row, his worried mother had nearly smothered him in hugs. When he delivered the droids to Watto, the angry Toydarian nearly lost his voice after

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bellowing reprimands for several minutes. Watto calmed down a bit after seeing the quality of the droids that Anakin had obtained from the Jawas, but by the end of the day, nothing had really changed. Tatooine was still a harsh, lawless world, and Anakin was still a slave.

The following day, however, something remarkable happened. That was the day a Naboo starship landed on Tatooine, and Anakin's life was forever changed.

Chapter Five

It was midday in Mos Espa, and Anakin was cleaning fan switches in Watto's junkyard when his master loudly summoned him into the junk shop to watch the store. Inside, Watto was talking with a tall, bearded man who was dressed like a farmer; the man was accompanied by a rubbery-jointed humanoid alien with mottled skin and eyes on the top of his head, a girl dressed in rough peasant clothes, and a dome-headed, blue astromech droid.

While the tall man and the astromech followed the hovering Watto to the scrap yard to look at engine parts, Anakin hitched himself up onto the counter that snaked through the shop and studied the girl. She had delicate features, her skin too perfect for a peasant. She appeared to be a few years older than him, and Anakin found himself unable to take his eyes off her.

"Are you an angel?" he blurted out.

She smiled—his heart soared—and said, "What?"

"An angel," he responded as she stepped closer to him. "I've heard the deep space pilots talk about them. They are the most beautiful creatures in the universe. They live on the Moons of Iego, I think."

"You're a funny little boy," she said sweetly. "How do you know so much?"

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"I listen to all the traders and starpilots who come through here. I'm a pilot, you know, and someday, I'm going to fly away from this place."

"You're a pilot?" she said, as if she found it hard to believe.

"Mm-hmm. All my life."

"How long have you been here?"

"Since I was very little, three, I think. My mom and I were sold to Gardulla the Hutt, but she lost us, betting on the Podraces."

Sounding surprised and alarmed, the girl said, "You're a slave?"

Even though the girl had assumed correctly, Anakin didn't like being called a slave, and he felt stung by her question. "I'm a *person*," he said, glaring at her, "and my name is Anakin!"

"I'm sorry. I don't fully understand," the girl replied, and Anakin sensed she meant it. Unable to hold his gaze, she glanced around the shop's interior, as if seeking answers from the assorted scrap that lined the walls. "This is a strange place to me."

Anakin remembered his own arrival to Tatooine, and had to admit that he'd found it strange too. He tried to ignore the clumsy, mottled-skinned alien while he continued talking with the girl for a few more minutes, until the tall man and the astromech returned with Watto. The man announced that his group was leaving, and Anakin felt heartsick as the girl walked out the door.

After Watto gave Anakin permission to leave the shop, the boy caught up with the three outlanders and the astromech. When they learned a sandstorm was approaching, Anakin persuaded them to take temporary refuge in his home, where he introduced them to his mother and C-3PO. He discovered that the man was a Jedi Knight named Qui-Gon Jinn, the girl was fourteen-year-old Padmé Naberrie, the clumsy alien was a Gungan named Jar Jar Binks, and the astromech was R2-D2. When R2-D2 observed that the protocol droid, devoid of

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exterior plating, appeared to be naked, C-3PO became quite embarrassed.

Anakin had suspected that Qui-Gon Jinn was a Jedi even before the man admitted it in so many words. He had spotted Qui-Gon's lightsaber dangling from his belt on their way to Anakin's home, and he couldn't help wondering if Qui-Gon had come to Tatooine to free the slaves. Although Qui-Gon revealed few details about himself, Anakin could tell that he was a good and honorable man, the kind that had always been in short supply in Anakin's upbringing. Anakin admired the way Qui-Gon held himself with quiet confidence. When Jar Jar Binks made the mistake of using his own long tongue to snatch up a piece of food from the dining table, Anakin was both amused and amazed to see Qui-Gon's hand flash out with lightning speed to seize the Gungan's darting tongue with his thumb and forefinger.

"Don't do that again," Qui-Gon said with some severity before he released his grip and Jar Jar's tongue snapped back into his mouth.

Anakin thought, *Wizard!* Suddenly, he found himself wishing that Qui-Gon would teach him how to be a Jedi. But because Anakin had experienced enough disappointments in his life, it was difficult for him to imagine this could ever happen.

While Anakin and his mother sat with their new friends around the dining table, he told them of his dreams of becoming a Jedi. He learned that Padmé was a handmaiden to Queen Amidala of the planet Naboo, and that Qui-Gon had been escorting the queen and her entourage on an important mission to the planet Coruscant when their starship had been damaged, and they were forced to land on Tatooine without funds for the necessary repairs. Hoping to help, Anakin explained that a big Podrace, the Boonta Eve Classic, was scheduled for the following day. He volunteered to enter the race, which offered prize money that would more than pay for the parts they needed.

"Anakin!" Shmi protested. "Watto won't let you."

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“Watto doesn’t know I’ve built it.” Turning to Qui-Gon, he said, “You could make him think it was yours, and get him to let me pilot it for you.”

Although Padmé liked this idea about as much as Shmi did, Anakin was confident his plan—as well as his secret Podracer—would work.

The Boonta Eve Classic was the most dangerous race Anakin had ever flown in. It was a vicious, free-for-all competition, and more than one racer became victim to the high-speed turns, rocky obstacles, and dirty tricks of their dastardly adversaries.

The race’s start had been difficult for Anakin. When he’d gunned his Podracer’s engines at the starting signal, his turbines went dead, and he almost felt sick as he peered through his goggles to see the other pilots blasting off across the Starlite Flats, leaving him gasping in their dust. He’d lost precious seconds as he struggled with his controls, but when he finally managed to make the Radon-Ulzers fire, he threw his vehicle forward and launched out of Mos Espa Arena at top speed.

Soaring through the twisting chasms and over broad flats, Anakin managed to catch up with the other Podracers during the first lap. As the towering rock formations that dotted Mushroom Mesa whipped past him, he caught the scent of burning fuel a split second before he saw the scattered, smoking remains of the green-engined Pod that had been piloted by a Gran named Mawhonic. Somehow, he knew in his gut that Sebulba was responsible for the crash, and had no illusions that the Gran had survived.

Gripping his controls, Anakin gnashed his teeth and thought, *I’m not going to die like that!*

Anakin progressed at furious speed, maneuvering past several competitors as he sent his Podracer faster through the Boonta’s exotic-named perils of Jag Crag Gorge, Laguna Caves, and Bindy Bend. While other pilots slowed slightly to negotiate the notoriously twisty chasm known as the Corkscrew, Anakin

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maintained a steady high speed until he arrived at Devil's Doorknob, a passage so narrow that pilots were required to flip their vehicles on their sides to travel through it. With expert skill beyond his years, he flipped his Pod to launch out of Devil's Doorknob, then accelerated to even greater speed over the broad expanse of the dead-sea bed known as Hutt Flats. Moments later, Mos Espa Arena came into view, and then he hurtled past the crowds who'd watched his delayed departure only minutes earlier.

There were still two laps to go.

Anakin knew he was rapidly gaining on the leading racers. As his Pod shot out of Beggar's Canyon, he caught sight of Mars Guo far up ahead, just behind Sebulba. Suddenly, one of Mars Guo's engines exploded, and a moment later, his Pod was flying in all directions. Anakin plunged his own Pod dangerously close to the ground in a desperate effort to evade the fiery, airborne debris, but one large chunk of stray metal struck the steelton control cable that linked his Pod to his starboard engine. The control cable broke free, and Anakin's Pod—now linked only to the port engine—began spinning out of control.

Straining against the belts in his cockpit, Anakin tightened his neck muscles and clenched his teeth to prevent his head from snapping back. *Stay focused!* He sensed he was still traveling forward, and knew that the only reason he hadn't crashed so far was because the energy binder arc between the two engines had not yet failed.

As the surface of Tatooine blurred and spiraled around him, he punched at his cockpit controls until he stabilized the Pod, then reached for an emergency tool: his extendible magnetic retriever. He reached out with the tool, aiming its tip at the metal end of the starboard control cable that whipped and flailed alongside his cockpit. There was a satisfying *clank* as the magnetic retriever locked onto the cable's end. Anakin felt his arm strain as he pulled back on the cable, then he thrust the tool directly into

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the starboard cable socket. An instant later, he'd regained control of his ship.

Anakin didn't congratulate himself. His momentary loss of control had allowed the Xexto pilot Gasgano and a couple of other pilots to pass him, and Sebulba was still in the lead. Anakin did what he had to do: he kept going, only faster.

He swung around Gasgano, but as he attempted to pass the Veknoid pilot Teemto Pagalies, he felt a sudden bone-jarring jolt as Pagalies swerved to deliberately smack one of his long engines against Anakin's Pod. Anakin sat tight in his cockpit and stayed in control to lead Pagalies out of the Laguna Caves to emerge at the base of the wide, high-walled stretch called Canyon Dune Turn.

KRAK!

Despite the roar of his engines, Anakin heard the shot from above. A millisecond later, bright sparks flashed in front of him as fired projectiles pinged off his Pod. *Sand people! They're shooting at me!* He pushed his throttle levers, which sent him faster across the canyon. Anakin made it. Pagalies wasn't so fortunate.

Anakin caught up with Sebulba in the Corkscrew, but the cruel Dug flashed his engines directly in front of the young human. Anakin's Pod fell back, but he was still in second place as he followed Sebulba's Pod sideways out through Devil's Doorknob. Less than a minute later, Anakin followed Sebulba again through Mos Espa Arena.

Only one more lap!

Anakin kept on Sebulba's tail through the course, and was almost directly behind him when they began swerving through the narrow confines of Beggar's Canyon. Sebulba swung hard to the side, forcing Anakin off the course and onto the steep gradient of a service ramp. A moment later, Anakin's engines were carrying his Pod up and out of the canyon, launching him skyward.

No! Anakin thought. If he didn't win the race and the prize money, he wouldn't be able to help the Jedi buy the starship

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parts he needed to leave Tatooine. And he wanted very much to help the Jedi and the girl who traveled with him.

I can't lose!

When his Pod reached its maximum repulsorlift altitude, Anakin stayed calm as the vehicle arched back toward Tatooine's surface. Far below, he could see Sebulba's Pod still traveling through the canyon. Keeping his eyes on Sebulba's position, Anakin steered into a steep dive. He felt the air tear against his cheeks as he plunged back into the canyon, then angled his Pod and accelerated to position himself in front of the enraged Dug.

The thrill of being in the lead didn't last long. As Anakin and Sebulba headed through Jett's Chute on their way to the Corkscrew, Anakin's left engine overheated and began billowing smoke. The boy's nimble fingers quickly adjusted the controls to correct the malfunction, but as the two Pods blasted out of Devil's Doorknob and over the final stretch of Hutt Flats, Sebulba began ramming Anakin from the side in a last nasty effort to force him out of the race.

Anakin thought, *He's crazy!*

The Dug slammed into Anakin again, but instead of knocking Anakin off course, the two Pods' steering rods became tangled and locked onto each other. Anakin glanced at Sebulba and saw the Dug frowning. If they remained locked in this position all the way over the finish line, the race would be a tie, but Anakin knew that would never happen. *Sebulba will either kill me or get us both killed before he'd allow a tie.*

Anakin jostled his throttle levers back and forth. *I have to break free.*

There was a loud *snap* as Anakin's Pod broke free from Sebulba's, and then the Dug's engines exploded. Sebulba shouted as his shattered Pod began crashing through the sand; Anakin swerved to avoid the debris, then accelerated for the finish line.

I did it! I won! I won! The crowd in the arena went wild.

After the race, a jubilant Anakin met with his mother, Padmé, Jar Jar, R2-D2, and C-3PO in the main hangar at the arena,

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where Watto had delivered the starship parts that Qui-Gon had requested. Anakin hadn't expected a celebration of his victory, but any hope of spending more time with his new friends ended when Qui-Gon showed up a few minutes later, looked to his traveling companions and said, "Let's go. We've got to get these parts back to the ship."

Anakin bit his lower lip. He wished he could leave Tatooine too, but knew it was pointless to say so. As Padmé and the others prepared to leave, he looked up at Qui-Gon, who said, "I have a few things to do before I leave. Go back home with your mother, and I'll meet you there in about an hour."

After returning home with Shmi and C-3PO and getting cleaned up, Anakin could not resist going outside to meet with some enthusiastic youngsters who'd seen him in the Boonta. He enjoyed their attention, and did his best to recount in detail the numerous hazards he'd encountered during the race. Most of the kids were very impressed. They listened attentively until a young Rodian, speaking in Huttese, said, "Too bad you didn't win fair and square."

Anakin glared at the Rodian and said, "You're calling me a cheater?"

"Yeah," the Rodian said. "No other way a human could've won. I'm guessing you probably—"

Before the Rodian could say another word, Anakin had knocked him to the sandy street. The other kids began shouting as Anakin straddled the Rodian and began punching him. Only a few blows had been exchanged before a long shadow appeared over both boys. Distracted, Anakin glanced up to see Qui-Gon standing beside him. A moment later, the Rodian shoved Anakin off of him.

Gazing down at Anakin, Qui-Gon said flatly, "What's this all about?"

"He said I cheated," Anakin glowered.

Keeping his eyes fixed on Anakin, Qui-Gon raised his eyebrows slightly and said, "Did you?"

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Anakin was mildly outraged by the question. After all, Qui-Gon *knew* he hadn't cheated. Wondering why Qui-Gon didn't defend him, Anakin snapped, "No!"

Unruffled, Qui-Gon looked to the Rodian and asked, "Do you still think he cheated?"

In Huttese, the Rodian answered, "Yes, I do."

As Anakin pushed himself up from the ground, Qui-Gon said, "Well, Ani. You know the truth. You'll just have to tolerate his opinion. Fighting won't change it."

Maybe not, Anakin thought as he walked off with Qui-Gon, leaving the Rodian and the other kids behind. Still, he wasn't sure that tolerance was the best option. *If you don't defend your honor, no one will*. He wondered if Jedi ever had to defend their honor, but was reluctant to ask Qui-Gon. Even though the Jedi hadn't scolded him for fighting the Rodian, Qui-Gon had made it fairly obvious that he hadn't approved.

As they walked the short distance back to Anakin's home, Qui-Gon explained that repairs were already underway to Queen Amidala's starship, and that he'd sold Anakin's Pod. Handing a small pouch filled with credits to Anakin, Qui-Gon said, "Hey. These are yours."

Feeling the weight of the bag, Anakin exclaimed, "Yes!" Followed by Qui-Gon, he entered his home, where he found his mother sitting at her worktable. "Mom," he cried, "we sold the Pod! Look at all the money we have!"

"My goodness!" Shmi said as Anakin revealed the contents of the pouch he carried. "But that's so wonderful, Ani!"

Standing in the doorway, Qui-Gon added, "And he has been freed."

Anakin turned away from his mother and looked up at Qui-Gon. Wondering if he'd heard right, Anakin said, "What?"

"You're no longer a slave," Qui-Gon said.

Still slightly stunned by this unexpected news, Anakin looked back to his mother and said, "Did you hear that?"

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"Now you can make your dreams come true, Ani," his mother said. "You are free." Then she sighed and looked down at the dirt floor.

Anakin thought his mother looked sad, and couldn't understand why she would be. Before he could ask, she turned her gaze to Qui-Gon and said, "Will you take him with you? Is he to become a Jedi?"

"Yes." Qui-Gon said. "Our meeting was not a coincidence. Nothing happens by accident."

Suspecting he really was dreaming, Anakin faced the Jedi and said, "You mean, *I* get to come with *you* in your starship?"

Kneeling down so he was almost eye-level with the boy, Qui-Gon said, "Anakin, training to become a Jedi is not an easy challenge, and even if you succeed, it's a hard life."

"But I wanna go!" Anakin said. "It's what I've always dreamed of doing." Turning away from Qui-Gon, he looked imploringly to his mother and said, "Can I go, Mom?"

Shmi smiled. "Anakin, this path has been placed before *you*. The choice is yours alone."

Anakin hesitated only a moment, then said, "I wanna do it."

"Then pack your things," Qui-Gon said. "We haven't much time."

"Yippee!" Anakin shouted as he ran toward his bedroom, but then he stopped dead as an awful realization suddenly occurred to him. Letting his gaze travel from Qui-Gon to his mother and back to the Jedi again, he said, "What about Mom? Is she free, too?"

"I tried to free your mother, Ani," Qui-Gon said, "but Watto wouldn't have it."

What? Anakin felt as if he'd been kicked. He walked slowly back to his mother and said, "You're coming with us, aren't you, Mom?"

Still seated beside her worktable, Shmi reached out and took Anakin's hands in hers. "Son, my place is here," she said. "My future is here. It is time for you to let go."

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Anakin frowned. "I don't want things to change."

"But you can't stop the change," Shmi said, "any more than you can stop the suns from setting." Then she pulled her son close against her and hugged him tight. "Oh, I love you," she said. Precious seconds passed, then she held Anakin out at arm's length and said, "Now hurry." She gave his back a slight push before he trotted off to his bedroom, but without so much enthusiasm.

C-3PO's skeletal form had been deactivated and stood as silent and still as a statue as Anakin entered his room. Anakin flipped a switch on the droid's neck, and a moment later C-3PO's eyes winked on. "Oh!" the droid said, wobbling slightly as if he were surprised to find himself in a standing position. "Oh, my." Then he saw the boy. "Oh! Hello, Master Anakin."

As Anakin gathered up some of his belongings, he said, "Well, Threepio, I've been freed, and I'm going away in a starship."

"Master Anakin, you are my maker, and I wish you well. However, I should prefer it if I were a little more...completed."

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to finish you, Threepio, give you coverings and all," Anakin said as he stuffed some things into a travel sack. "I'm gonna miss working on you. You've been a great pal." Anakin slung the pack over his shoulder, then added, "I'll make sure Mom doesn't sell you or anything."

C-3PO's head recoiled slightly, and with genuine concern he said, "Sell me?"

"Bye," Anakin said as he left the room.

"Oh, my!" the droid exclaimed from behind.

Qui-Gon and Shmi watched Anakin emerge from his room. Suddenly, Anakin remembered the explosive implant within his body. He looked up at Qui-Gon and said, "Are you *sure* I'm not going to blow up when we leave Tatooine?"

"I made sure that Watto deactivated the transmitter for your implant," Qui-Gon said. "When we reach our destination, we'll have the implant surgically removed."

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“Okay, then,” Anakin said. “I guess I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.”

Until the moment that Anakin led his mother and Qui-Gon outside the hovel, it hadn’t occurred to him that he had no idea when he might return to Tatooine. *What if I never come back?* He suddenly felt like he was on remote, as if he were not in complete control of his own legs as they carried him into the harsh sunlight. It was hard to think clearly. Everything that had happened since the Jedi arrived on Tatooine seemed more like a dream than a reality.

He felt an awful ache in his chest as he said good-bye to his mother, but because he didn’t want to disappoint Qui-Gon, he tried not to make a big deal of the situation. He began to walk away with Qui-Gon, tried to concentrate on the path before him, but with each step, his legs felt increasingly heavy. He walked only a short distance when he stopped, then turned and ran back to his mother.

Shmi dropped to her knees and held Anakin tightly. Failing to fight back his tears, Anakin cried, “I can’t do it, Mom. I just can’t do it.”

“Ani,” Shmi said, holding him at arm’s length so she could see his pained face.

“Will I ever see you again?” he sobbed.

“What does your heart tell you?”

Anakin tried to listen to his heart, but all he sensed was its ache. “I hope so,” he said, then added, “Yes...I guess.”

“Then we will see each other again.”

Anakin swallowed hard. “I will come back and free you, Mom. I promise.”

Shmi smiled. “Now be brave, and don’t look back. *Don’t look back.*”

Anakin did as his mother instructed, lowering his gaze to the sand-packed street as he followed Qui-Gon away from the hovels. Each step was an effort to stay balanced, as if he could not completely trust his legs from stopping or turning him back

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toward his mother. He trudged forward, trying to keep up with Qui-Gon's measured strides. He choked back a sob and felt his throat go dry. Thanks to the arid air, he did not have to wipe away his tears, for they evaporated faster than he could cry.

Making their way out of Mos Espa, Qui-Gon and Anakin stopped briefly at the market place so Anakin could say good-bye to his friend Jira, an old woman who sold fruits called pallies. Seated behind her small fruit stand, Jira's weathered face brightened at Anakin's approach. Anakin announced, "I'm free." Before Jira could comment, he handed her some of his winnings and said, "Here. Buy yourself a cooling unit with this or else I'll worry about you."

Astonished, Jira gaped for a moment, then said, "Can I give you a hug?"

"Sure," Anakin said as he leaned in close to Jira.

"Oh, I'll miss you, Ani," Jira said as she released him. "You're the kindest boy in the galaxy." Beaming, she wagged a finger at him and added, "You take care."

"Okay," Anakin said. "I will. Bye." He trudged off with Qui-Gon.

Anakin and Qui-Gon were at the very outskirts of Mos Espa when Anakin had a strange feeling...*Like we're being followed*. He doubted that the feeling was worth mentioning, but a moment later, Qui-Gon stopped fast and spun as he activated and swung his lightsaber at something behind them. Once again amazed by the Jedi's speed, Anakin gasped as the lightsaber swept through a spherical black repulsorlift device that had been hovering in the air at their backs.

Neatly halved, the shattered contraption fell to the sand. Qui-Gon bent down to examine the parts as they sizzled and sparked.

Anakin said, "What is it?"

"A probe droid," Qui-Gon said. "Very unusual. Not like anything I've seen before."

Anakin had heard of probe droids before. They resembled security droids, which were engineered to watch over places, but

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their specialized sensors and programming were more for spying. He'd heard rumors that some probe droids were equipped with weapons, and that the Hutts used them as assassins.

Glancing around for any sign of the probe droid's unknown owner, Qui-Gon rose quickly and said, "Come on." He turned and began to run, leading Anakin away from Mos Espa and into the desert wastes.

Anakin did his best to keep up with the tall Jedi as they raced over the dunes. But by the time Anakin sighted Queen Amidala's long, sleek starship just up ahead of them, he was trailing some distance behind the Jedi. Anakin had never seen a ship like it. Its surface was so highly reflective that it was literally blinding in the sunlight, and Anakin had to squint to look at it directly. As he fell farther behind Qui-Gon, he feared he'd never reach that beautiful ship.

"Qui-Gon, sir, wait!" Anakin yelled as he trudged forward across the shifting sand. "I'm tired!"

Qui-Gon spun and Anakin thought the Jedi was looking at him, but then heard the hum of an engine approaching from behind. Qui-Gon shouted, "Anakin! Drop!"

Without hesitation, Anakin threw himself down upon the sand just as a scythe-shaped speeder swept past him. Anakin lifted his gaze to see a black-clad figure ignite a red-bladed lightsaber and leap from the speeder. As the speeder hurtled forward without its rider, Qui-Gon activated his own lightsaber just in time to block a strike from his deadly assailant.

"Go!" Qui-Gon shouted to Anakin. "Tell them to take off!"

Again, Anakin obeyed the Jedi without question. As he got up and ran, he caught but a glimpse of the dark warrior's face, which was covered with jagged red and black markings. Anakin didn't stop to ponder whether one color was the creature's skin color and the other was tattooed. He just kept running. And as tired as he was from the long run from Mos Espa, he never ran faster than he did when he bolted for the starship. He practically flew up the landing ramp and into the ship's forward hold. Just inside

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the hatchway, he found Padmé talking to a tall man in a leather tunic.

“Qui-Gon’s in trouble!” Anakin blurted out between gasps. “He says to take off! Now!”

The man scowled at Anakin and demanded. “Who are you?”

“He’s a friend,” Padmé answered for Anakin as she grabbed the breathless boy’s arm and led him to the ship’s bridge. The man followed them as they entered the bridge, where two other men—an older fellow in a pilot uniform, and a younger man in a robe—were checking the controls.

“Qui-Gon’s in trouble,” said the man who had followed Padmé and Anakin.

The young man in the robe hunkered down beside the pilot and said, “Take off.” Then he peered through the ship’s viewport, pointed and said, “Over there. Fly low.”

Anakin stood behind the robed man and followed his gaze to see Qui-Gon dueling the dark warrior. In the short time he’d known Qui-Gon, Anakin had come to regard the Jedi as an invincible being, but now, he genuinely feared for Qui-Gon’s life.

The ship’s engines fired, then it lifted from the ground and began moving through the air toward Qui-Gon’s position. Anakin held his breath as they passed over the fighting figures, then glanced at a monitor that displayed the forward hold. A moment later, Qui-Gon rolled into the hold and collapsed against the floor. Anakin realized Qui-Gon had leaped to the ship’s still-extended landing ramp. *He made it!*

The robed man ran from the bridge to the forward hold and Anakin followed. Qui-Gon was still catching his breath as he introduced Anakin to his Jedi apprentice, Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Anakin’s departure from Tatooine was followed by a dizzying series of events: his arrival on the skyscraper-covered world of Coruscant, home of the Galactic Senate and the Jedi Temple; his meeting with Yoda, Mace Windu, and the other members of the Jedi High Council, who tested his abilities with the power that

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they called the Force; the Council's subsequent rejection of Qui-Gon's request to train Anakin to become a Jedi, even though Qui-Gon insisted that Anakin was the "chosen one." Anakin's mind spun. *Chosen one? Chosen for what?*

Before Anakin could begin to fully comprehend his situation, he was traveling again with Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan, as they escorted the ornately attired Queen Amidala back to Naboo, which had been invaded by the droid armies of the Neimoidian Trade Federation. On Naboo, Anakin was stunned to discover that Padmé Naberrie had impersonated a handmaiden for security reasons, and that she was really Padmé Amidala, the true Queen of Naboo.

Suddenly swept up into the battle between the Trade Federation's droids and the inhabitants of Naboo, Anakin had just taken refuge in a starfighter cockpit when Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan were confronted by the same dark warrior who'd appeared on Tatooine. Although Anakin had not intended to commandeer the starfighter to destroy the large ship that controlled the Federation's droids, his actions brought a swift end to the invasion.

After the battle, Anakin found Obi-Wan at the queen's palace. From Obi-Wan's grim expression, Anakin knew what had happened. Qui-Gon Jinn was dead.

Three days later, the Jedi Council honored Qui-Gon's final wish, and allowed Anakin to become Obi-Wan's apprentice. When Anakin realized that even the newly appointed Supreme Chancellor Palpatine, the former Senator of Naboo, was aware of his role in destroying the droid control ship, he thought he'd gone as far as a slave from Tatooine ever could.

But his adventures were only beginning.

Interlude

Darth Vader never pondered what might have happened if Qui-Gon Jinn had not discovered young Anakin Skywalker, or if Anakin had not won that crucial Podrace. Nor did he wonder whether Anakin's life might have taken a different path if Qui-Gon—instead of Obi-Wan Kenobi—had survived the duel with the Sith Lord Darth Maul on Naboo. On Tatooine, Qui-Gon had asserted that nothing happened by accident, and although there were many things that Vader would have disagreed upon with Qui-Gon, he would have agreed with this, because Vader believed in destiny.

He believed it had been Anakin's destiny to leave Tatooine and become a Jedi, just as he had been destined for everything that had happened after that. It was pointless to speculate how his life might have been different.

Now, still en route to Endor, the black-masked Dark Lord wondered if Luke Skywalker had any illusions about being able to control his own destiny. Vader thought, If he fights me, he will fail.

Still, Vader would have been almost disappointed if Luke were to surrender too soon, without any effort to resist the power of the dark side. After all, Anakin Skywalker had been a young man once, and he had not surrendered easily....

Chapter Six

As a Padawan apprentice to Obi-Wan Kenobi, Anakin Skywalker was eager to become a Jedi Knight. However, the hallowed halls of the Jedi Temple did not encourage eagerness, and the Jedi Masters insisted that Anakin devote himself to serious study of the Force and the history of the Jedi.

He learned about the nature of the Force, the energy field that was generated by all living things, and which suffused and bound the entire galaxy together. Ancient Jedi had learned to manipulate the Force and chose to use it selflessly to help others. They identified two sides to the Force: the light side, which bestowed great knowledge, peace, and serenity; and the dark side, which was filled with fear, anger, and aggression. Long ago, a group of Jedi had turned to the dark side and were exiled to an unknown region of space, where they came to dominate the Sith species and to call themselves Sith Lords. Jedi investigators concluded that Qui-Gon Jinn's killer was a Sith Lord, the first to appear in Republic space for a thousand years.

Anakin also learned about *midi-chlorians*, microscopic life-forms found in all living things, which could determine the scope of a Jedi's powers. A blood test had determined that Anakin's body contained more midi-chlorians than any known Jedi, even

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the great Jedi Master Yoda, which led some Jedi to believe that he had the potential to become the most powerful Jedi ever.

The Jedi Archives were filled with many Jedi Holocrons, ancient devices that projected holograms and served as interactive educational tools, and it was through the Holocrons that Anakin learned more about the prophecy of the Chosen One, a Jedi who would destroy the Sith and bring balance to the Force. He could only imagine the ramifications of the prophecy, but he felt very, very proud as he recalled how Qui-Gon Jinn had told the Jedi Council that he believed Anakin was the Chosen One.

But Anakin was also bitter that he had not been *chosen* by Obi-Wan, who had only accepted him as an apprentice out of obligation to Qui-Gon. Because Anakin had not been trained since infancy at the Temple like nearly all other Padawans, various Jedi Masters accepted the fact that he lacked the discipline of his fellow students. They were less accepting, however, of his arrogant behavior when he demonstrated his abilities.

I'm more powerful with the Force than some of my instructors, Anakin thought, *and they know it!*

Like eagerness, pride and arrogance were not acceptable characteristics for any Jedi, even if he really did turn out to be the Chosen One. Many Jedi remained cautious of him.

They're just jealous.

Anakin enjoyed praise from Obi-Wan, but often became sullen when he was reprimanded. Obi-Wan assured him that he himself had been frequently reminded by Qui-Gon to be more mindful of the Force, but somehow even the slightest criticism managed to leave Anakin feeling stung.

First they tell me to do my best, then they tell me I've gone too far!

Obi-Wan was sympathetic. He knew that Anakin's upbringing—as well as his formidable powers—set him apart from the other Padawans and even alienated him from some of

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the Jedi Masters. After all, Anakin had an unfortunate history with the word “Master.”

They don't know what it's like to be born into slavery.

He also had difficulty adjusting to an environment that discouraged anger as well as love, as such emotions could cloud a Jedi's judgment and lead to negative thoughts and actions. The boy could no sooner forget his mother than he could stop loving her. Nor could he stop missing her, or resenting the fact that the Jedi order discouraged contact with relatives.

Why won't they help me free my mother? It's not fair! It's not right!

Countless times, Obi-Wan explained that every Jedi had to obey the directives of the Jedi Council, and could never use the Force for selfish purposes. He urged Anakin to consider how freeing one slave on Tatooine might lead to the deaths of others, as some slavers might prefer to destroy their “property” than release them from bondage. The Jedi also had to answer to the Galactic Senate, and for the time being, the Senate had little interest in anything that happened on Tatooine.

Why do the Jedi have to answer to anybody? Anakin wondered.

Despite Anakin's desire to distance himself from the slave he had once been, he was unable, or unwilling, to shed the other aspects that had defined him on Tatooine. He still dreamed of glory, still craved adventure, and never lost his appetite for high-speed thrills and the desire to prove himself in competition.

Over the years, Anakin's actions often tested his master's patience. At age twelve, he flew in illegal garbage pit races in the bowels of Galactic City on Coruscant. When he was nearly thirteen, he constructed his first lightsaber, which he soon used to bring about the end of a notorious slaver named Krayn. At fifteen, while on a mission with Obi-Wan to serve as peacekeepers at the Galactic Games on the planet Euceron, he competed in an illegal Podrace to win the freedom of a slave. At seventeen, his rivalry with another Padawan led to a most unfortunate outcome on the ancient Sith homeworld of

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Korriban. Later that year, unusual circumstances led him to enter a Podrace against his childhood nemesis, Sebulba, on Ryloth.

Eventually, Anakin realized that Obi-Wan was the one Jedi who refused to give up on him. He came to regard Obi-Wan as the father figure he never had, although Qui-Gon Jinn had certainly come close in that area. In time, Anakin and Obi-Wan learned to trust each other and became close friends. As with Obi-Wan's former partnership with Qui-Gon, they gained a reputation as a capable team, so attuned that they could sense each other's presence across great distances. Although they were most often called upon for diplomatic missions, they were also dispatched on many dangerous assignments.

Much to Anakin's surprise, Supreme Chancellor Palpatine took a special interest in him and his activities. Time and again, Palpatine told Anakin that he was the most gifted Jedi he'd ever met, and that he envisioned Anakin would someday become even more powerful than Master Yoda.

But for all of Anakin's confidence in his powers, all his accomplishments and victories, and all the lessons learned in the decade that followed the Battle of Naboo, nothing prepared him, at age twenty, for his reunion with Padmé Amidala.

"Ani?" said Padmé, taken aback at the sight of the tall young man who stood beside Obi-Wan in her apartment on Coruscant. The two Jedi had just returned from a mission to resolve a border dispute on Ansion when they'd been instructed to meet with Padmé, who had continued to serve her homeworld as a Galactic Senator after completing her second term as the elected Queen of Naboo. Also present in the apartment were Jar Jar Binks and a Naboo security officer. Padmé and Jar Jar had not seen Obi-Wan and Anakin in ten years, and Padmé beamed at Anakin as she said, "My goodness, how you've grown."

Hoping to sound mature, Anakin replied without thinking, "So have you." *What a stupid thing to say. The last time I saw her, I was shorter than her!* Hoping to recover from his embarrassment,

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he added, “Grown more beautiful, I mean.” *Did I just say that?* “Well, f-for a Senator, I mean.” *Everyone in this room must think I’m an idiot!*

Padmé laughed, “Ani, you’ll always be that little boy I knew on Tatooine.”

Anakin felt crushed. He’d thought of Padmé every day since their first encounter, and he didn’t want her to think of him as “that little boy.”

She’s even more beautiful than I remembered.

Although the old friends were glad to see each other again, the circumstances of their reunion were grave. The Galactic Senate had grown so corrupt that the citizens of many worlds were threatening to end their allegiance to the Republic and create their own government. A former Jedi, the charismatic Count Dooku, had begun to organize this Separatist movement, and many believed the situation would erupt into an all-out civil war. Because the Jedi order was unprepared for such a massive conflict, many Senators wanted to create an army to defend and preserve the Republic.

Hoping to find a peaceful resolution, Senator Amidala had traveled to Coruscant to cast her vote against the Military Creation Act, but was nearly assassinated upon her arrival. In a terrifying ambush, her starship was destroyed and six people, including one of her bodyguards, were killed. At Supreme Chancellor Palpatine’s request, Obi-Wan and Anakin had been appointed to protect Padmé.

To make matters worse, in recent weeks, Anakin had been disturbed by a series of dreams that his mother was in danger. He considered whether the dreams had been some kind of premonition of the attack on Padmé, but sensed that the visions were unrelated. In the most startling nightmare, his mother had been transformed into a glass statue and shattered before his eyes. *It was just a bad dream*, Anakin tried to convince himself as he focused on his assignment.

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It was Padmé's idea to use herself as bait to lure the mysterious assassin into the hands of the Jedi.

Hearing her plan, Anakin said, "It's a bad...I mean, it's not a good idea, Senator." Beside him, R2-D2 beeped in what may have been an agreement. Although Anakin had been secretly happy to have had this moment alone with Padmé in her apartment, he almost wished Obi-Wan were with them right now, instead of meeting with the Jedi Council, so that he could discourage Padmé, too.

Padmé said, "Moving me to a different suite will only delay another attack."

"But what you're suggesting is far too dangerous. You could get hurt."

"That *is* a possibility," Padmé said. "But if we prepare for an attack here in this suite, and really cover every angle, then we would have an advantage over the assassin, wouldn't we? And Artoo can help..."

Looking away from Padmé, Anakin shook his head and said, "It would still be too risky. For all we know, there may be a whole army of assassins."

Padmé stepped closer to Anakin, forcing him to turn back to her and meet her gaze. She said, "I have no interest in dying, Anakin, but I don't want any more innocent people to lose their lives because someone wants me dead. If you can understand that, then you'll help me do this."

As much as Anakin wanted to apprehend the people who had tried to kill Padmé, he knew that Obi-Wan would not readily approve the idea of using Padmé as bait. Despite his better judgment, Anakin said, "All right, Senator. I'll help you."

Obi-Wan didn't learn about the plan until later that evening, when Padmé was already asleep. Despite their preparations and the watchful presence of R2-D2, Obi-Wan and Anakin had to move fast to intercept the pair of kouhuns—small, deadly arthropods—that invaded the sleeping Senator's apartment and stealthily slithered their way onto her bed. The Jedi had to move

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even faster to catch up with the assassin who'd unleashed the kouhuns.

Traveling by airspeeder and instinct, the Jedi pursued their quarry for more than 100 kilometers through the skies and streets of Galactic City before their hunt ended in a crowded nightclub. Although the assassin appeared to be a fair-skinned female human, she was actually a Clawdite shapeshifter who wore a dark elastic bodysuit that remained taut when she changed forms. Inside the nightclub, her attempt to shoot Obi-Wan in the back had resulted in the Jedi using his lightsaber to literally disarm her. The Clawdite was still in shock as Obi-Wan carried her through an exit that led to an alley outside the club. Anakin walked alongside them, and the look of simmering rage in his eyes was all the power he needed to encourage the local denizens to clear the alley.

The Clawdite moaned as Obi-Wan eased her trembling body onto the alley floor. Anakin hoped she would stay conscious long enough to provide some answers. Obi-Wan looked into the Clawdite's eyes and said, "Do you know who it was you were trying to kill?"

"It was a senator from Naboo," the Clawdite muttered.

"And who hired you?"

The muscles in her face spasmed as she tried to maintain a human visage. She muttered, "It was just a job."

Kneeling beside the Clawdite, Anakin felt his anger rise at this creature who considered killing Padmé "just a job." It took all of his self-control to maintain a calm, gentle tone as he leaned forward and asked, "Who hired you? Tell us."

The Clawdite's eyes rolled toward Anakin. When she didn't answer immediately, Anakin roared, "Tell us now!"

The Clawdite gulped, then said, "It was a bounty hunter called—"

Her statement was interrupted by a small projectile that made a *ftzzz* sound as it streaked down and embedded itself in her neck. Anakin and Obi-Wan turned their heads fast and traced the

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projectile's trajectory to a high upper roof, where an armored man wearing a jetpack suddenly launched into the sky and disappeared.

The two Jedi looked back to the Clawdite, whose flesh turned dark green as her features contorted back to their natural configuration. "Wee shahnit...sleemo," she gasped before her head tilted back.

Being fluent in Huttese, Anakin understood the assassin's last words: *bounty hunter slimeball*. And with great bitterness, he wished she had given them a name instead.

Obi-Wan reached to the dead Clawdite's neck and removed the projectile, a nasty little item that had stabilizing fins for long-range shooting and an injector-needle tip. "Toxic dart," Obi-Wan observed.

Anakin felt some relief that at least one assassin could no longer harm Padmé. Looking at the Clawdite's corpse, he thought, *You got what you deserved*.

And then he trembled. He knew it wasn't the way of the Jedi to think anyone *deserved* to die.

But he'd thought it just the same.

Chapter Seven

Because Senator Amidala was still in danger, the Jedi Council instructed Obi-Wan to track down the elusive bounty hunter while Anakin escorted Padmé back to Naboo. To prevent anyone from knowing Padmé's whereabouts, she and Anakin disguised themselves as refugees and left with R2-D2 aboard a starfreighter for the Naboo system. Anakin remained extremely concerned for Padmé's safety, but he was also secretly delighted that his mission—his first official assignment without his Master—would allow him to spend more time with the young woman he had adored since childhood.

Is it possible she has feelings for me too? he couldn't stop wondering.

Inside the Naboo-bound starfreighter, they kept to themselves among the emigrants in the steerage hold. Anakin chanced a nap during the long flight, but was visited by another nightmare. In his sleep, he muttered, "No, no, Mom, no..." then woke with a start. Padmé hovered near, looking at him. Somewhat confused, he returned her gaze and said, "What?"

"You seemed to be having a nightmare."

Anakin didn't comment. But later, while sharing a meal of mush and bread, Padmé persisted. "You were dreaming about your mother earlier, weren't you?"

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“Yes,” Anakin admitted. “I left Tatooine so long ago, my memory of her is fading. I don’t want to lose it. Recently, I’ve been seeing her in my dreams...vivid dreams...scary dreams. I worry about her.”

Just then, R2-D2 moved over to them and emitted an electronic whistle. The starfreighter had arrived in the Naboo system.

Anakin accompanied Padmé everywhere on Naboo, and soon met her family. At first, Padmé treated her Jedi guardian like a slightly unwelcome shadow that followed her every movement. She seemed as determined to withhold personal information as he was to discover it, and denied to her own sister that her relationship with Anakin was anything other than professional.

But as the days passed, she became more relaxed in the presence of the young man who was constantly at her side, and their conversations changed from her devotion to politics and his concerns regarding security to more intimate subjects. As for Anakin, he learned about Padmé’s cherished memories of children she’d known as a relief worker, and her favorite places on Naboo. Because Anakin had grown up under the sweltering suns of Tatooine, he’d felt cold on most of the worlds he’d visited, but with Padmé on Naboo, he felt—for the first time in his life—truly comfortable. And happy.

They were standing on the garden terrace at a lodge that overlooked a lake, and Padmé was wearing a gown that revealed the fair skin of her back and arms when Anakin cautiously leaned close to her face and kissed her. She did not resist, but several seconds after their lips met, she pulled away from him and said, “No.” She looked away, fixing her eyes on the lake before them.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” she said.

Anakin had been aching to kiss her since their reunion on Coruscant, but he’d never planned on it, let alone imagined that he ever actually would. Padmé’s acceptance and return of his kiss had been his greatest moment of joy, and to be so suddenly

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rejected left him feeling devastated, embarrassed, and confused. He followed her gaze to the tranquil waters and said, "I'm sorry."

I'm sorry you don't feel the same way for me that I do for you.

Anakin tried to pretend the kiss had never happened. But with every minute that passed after that moment by the lake, every moment spent with Padmé, he felt more tortured, as if his heart had become an open wound. Unable to wish his feelings away, he confronted Padmé, who reminded him that Jedi were not allowed to marry, and that she was a Senator who had more important things to do than fall in love. When Anakin suggested that they might maintain a secret relationship, she told him that she refused to live a lie.

Anakin began wondering about his place in the Jedi order. The more he thought about all the rules to follow and the time devoted to meditation and training, the more he questioned the logic of so much personal sacrifice. *Is it so wrong that I care for Padmé as much as I do? Or that I still miss my mother and worry about her?* For the first time since he'd become a Jedi, he found himself seriously considering the possibility of relinquishing his lightsaber, leaving the order, and becoming a citizen of the galaxy.

He tried to imagine himself in another career. He was confident that he could find work as a pilot or a mechanic. *But would doing that sort of work make me happy?* The answer came immediately to Anakin: the *only* thing that would make him happy was to be with Padmé.

But what if I stopped being a Jedi and she still didn't see any chance of a future with me? What then? It was all too overwhelming to contemplate.

While Anakin's waking moments had become emotionally painful, sleeping was even worse. One morning, he was standing on a balcony at the lodge, meditating with his eyes closed, when he sensed Padmé's approach from behind.

"You had another nightmare last night," she said.

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“Jedi don’t have nightmares,” he replied tersely.

“I *heard* you.”

Anakin didn’t doubt that she had. The nightmare had been the worst one yet. He opened his eyes and said, “I saw my mother.” Turning to face Padmé, he fought to keep his voice from trembling. “She’s suffering, Padmé. I saw her as I see you now.” He let out a long sigh, barely releasing the pressure that was building up within him. He feared that last night’s dream was not a premonition, but a vision of events that had already transpired. “She’s in pain,” he continued. “I know I’m disobeying my mandate to protect you, Senator, but I have to go. I have to help her!”

“I’ll go with you,” Padmé said.

“I’m sorry,” Anakin said. “I don’t have a choice.”

He hadn’t expected the possibility that she might go with him to Tatooine. *I can continue to watch her. Obi-Wan wouldn’t approve, but...it’s not his decision.*

Without notifying Obi-Wan or the Jedi Council of his plans, Anakin, Padmé, and R2-D2 left Naboo in a slim H-type Nubian yacht. The fragrant scents of Padmé’s lush, fertile homeworld were still fresh in Anakin’s nostrils when he sighted the scorched, barren sand planet.

Descending through the atmosphere, they flew to the Mos Espa spaceport. After landing and securing the ship in one of the deep, open pits that served as landing bays, Anakin hired a droid-powered rickshaw to carry him and Padmé to Watto’s junk shop. R2-D2 motored along behind them.

Anakin wasn’t sure how he’d react when he saw Watto again. Although his former master had been kinder than other slave owners, Anakin had always resented the fact that Watto refused to free his mother. *Watto isn’t entirely to blame*, Anakin mused, wondering just how hard Qui-Gon had tried to liberate Shmi. *Slavery is allowed here, and Watto is just a businessman.*

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Soon they reached Watto's shop, where they found the old Toydarian seated out front. Not surprisingly, Watto did not recognize the tall young Jedi who stood before him, but when Anakin said he was looking for Shmi Skywalker, Watto made the connection.

"Ani?" Watto gasped in disbelief. "Little Ani? Nahhh!" His eyes went wide, then he flapped his wings and shouted, "You are Ani! It is you! You sure sprouted, huh?"

Watto then informed Anakin that he'd sold Shmi years earlier to a moisture farmer named Lars, and that he'd heard Lars had freed and married Shmi. Fortunately, Watto's records provided the location of the moisture farm, which was near a small community called Anchorhead.

After returning to their starship and blasting out of the landing bay, Anakin, Padmé, and R2-D2 soared high over the northern Dune Sea. It was only a matter of minutes before they touched down at the edge of the farm, which consisted of moisture-collecting vaporators spread out around a small, domed structure. The dome was an entrance to an underground homestead and an adjoining courtyard that rested in an open pit. R2-D2 stayed with the ship while Anakin and Padmé walked toward the dome. Once there, they were greeted by a fully plated protocol droid.

"Oh!" exclaimed the droid when he noticed the two humans approaching. The droid had been making a minor adjustment to a binocular Treadwell droid, but now turned to face Anakin and Padmé. "Um, uh, hello. How might I be of service? I am C—"

"Threepio?" Anakin said, wondering if his mother had been responsible for putting the metal coverings on the droid's body.

Confused, C-3PO tilted his head slightly. "Oh, um..." Then it hit him. "The maker! Oh, Master Ani! I knew you would return. I knew it! And Miss Padmé. Oh, my."

C-3PO led them down a flight of steps to the courtyard, where a surprised young man and woman emerged through an arched doorway. The couple wore drab desert robes that were

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common on the sand planet. The man was sturdily built, with strong farmer's hands.

C-3PO said, "Master Owen, might I present two most important visitors."

"I'm Anakin Skywalker," Anakin said.

"Owen Lars," Owen said, sounding slightly unnerved. Gesturing to the woman beside him, he said, "Uh, this is my girlfriend, Beru."

Beru smiled shyly, and exchanged greetings with Padmé.

Keeping his eyes on Anakin, Owen continued, "I guess I'm your stepbrother. I had a feeling you might show up someday."

Anxious and impatient, Anakin scanned the courtyard and said, "Is my mother here?"

"No, she's not," answered a deep voice from behind. Anakin and Padmé turned to see an older man whose grizzled features betrayed that he was obviously Owen's father. He was seated in a hovering mechno-chair, and his robe was pulled back to reveal that his right leg was a bandaged stump. "Cliegg Lars," he introduced himself as his chair carried him slowly forward. "Shmi is my wife. We should go inside. We have a lot to talk about."

A few minutes later, in the hollowed-out dining chamber, Anakin and Padmé were seated at a rectangular table with Cliegg and Owen. "It was just before dawn," Cliegg recounted. "They came out of nowhere. A hunting party of Tusken Raiders."

Anakin felt his stomach clench.

As Beru set a tray of beverages on the table, Cliegg continued, "Your mother had gone out early, like she always did, to pick mushrooms that grow on the vaporators. From the tracks, she was about halfway home when they took her. Those Tusken walk like men, but they're vicious, mindless monsters. Thirty of us went out after her. Four of us came back. I'd be with them, but after I lost my leg...I just couldn't ride anymore...un-until I heal."

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Anakin lowered his gaze to the untouched beverages on the table. His facial muscles twitched nervously as he thought, *If only she'd left Tatooine with me. If only I hadn't left her behind...* Anakin hadn't had much time to develop an opinion about Cliegg Lars. Initially, he had felt some sense of gratitude to the man who'd helped liberate his mother from Watto. But because Cliegg had taken his wife to live in this desolate area where Tusksens roamed, Anakin couldn't help feeling a bitter anger. *If only you hadn't brought her here!*

"I don't want to give up on her," Cliegg said, "but she's been gone a month. There's little hope she's lasted this long."

Making every effort to control his rage, Anakin rose and stepped away from the table.

"Where are you going?" Owen asked.

Anakin shot an accusatory glare at Owen and replied, "To find my mother."

Chapter Eight

The suns were beginning to set as Anakin stood outside the entry dome at the Lars family homestead. Owen had offered his swoop bike to Anakin, and the bike was now parked in the air a short distance from the dome. *I shouldn't be angry with Owen and Cliegg for giving up, Anakin thought. They cared for my mother, but they're only human. They can only do so much.*

Padmé emerged from the entry dome and went to Anakin. He knew she wanted to help, but he also knew there wasn't any way he was going to risk her life any more than he already had. "You're gonna have to stay here," he said. "These are good people, Padmé. You'll be safe."

"Anakin—"

They embraced. Anakin almost wished he could have frozen that moment, just to keep Padmé forever close to him. But darkness was coming up fast, and his mother was still out there somewhere. *She's alive, he felt. I know she is!*

Releasing himself from Padmé's arms, Anakin walked to the swoop bike. "I won't be long," he said. He swung himself onto the bike, fired the engine, and tore off across the desert floor.

With the hot wind whipping at his robe, Anakin crossed into the Jundland Wastes, where Tusken Raiders were known to hide

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and hunt among the towering rock formations. He didn't wonder why the Tusken had taken his mother, or why they hadn't killed her as they had the other farmers. For all he knew, the Tusken were acting out some profane ritual. Their motives were not his concern. He just wanted his mother back.

He also wanted her back in one piece. He thought about what the Tusken had done to Cliegg Lars, and he launched the bike faster over the Wastes.

He was about 150 kilometers from the Lars homestead when he sighted the tall silhouettes of sandcrawlers against the twilight sky. It was a Jawa camp. Although Jawas feared Tusken Raiders as much as anyone on Tatooine, Anakin knew the small, glowing-eyed scavengers would be more willing to provide information if he gave something in return. In exchange for a multitool and a portable scanner that he found in his borrowed bike's pannier, the Jawas told him he should head east to find a Tusken camp.

Tatooine's suns had long since set and the moons hung low over the horizon when Anakin saw the cluster of flickering campfires at the bottom of a deep valley. Leaving the swoop bike on the edge of a high cliff, he kept to the shadows as he ventured down into the valley and moved silently toward the camp.

The camp consisted of about two dozen tents made of skins and salvaged bits of wood from Tatooine's long-dead forests. Two Tusken stood a short distance from one tent, guarding it. Anakin reached out with the Force and sensed his mother was inside. Without drawing any attention to himself, he maneuvered around to the back of the tent, used his lightsaber to cut a hole through the taut skin covering, and stepped inside.

Anakin found his mother at the center of the tent, tied to a frame made of thin wooden sticks. A small fire burned in a nearby pot and cast warm, wicked shadows across the tent walls. Shmi wasn't moving.

Scared as a child, Anakin said, "Mom?"

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No response. He could see from the dried blood on her face and arms that she'd been terribly beaten. "Mom?" Still no response. She was barely alive. She moaned as he slipped her wrists free from the leather strips that had bound her to the frame. He gently lowered her to the ground, cradling her upper body in his arms. "Mom?"

Shmi's bruised eyelids fluttered open, and she struggled to focus on Anakin's face. "Ani?" she muttered. "Is it you?"

"I'm here, Mom," he said. "You're safe."

"Ani? Ani?" She seemed confused, as if she were trying to figure out whether he really was there. Then, incredibly, she managed to smile at him. "Oh, you look so handsome." She brushed her hand against his face, and he kissed her open palm. "My son. Oh, my grown-up son. I'm so proud of you, Ani."

Anakin swallowed hard and felt the sting of tears in his eyes as he said, "I missed you."

"Now I am complete," Shmi said. "I love y—"

Anakin tensed as her voice cut off. "Stay with me, Mom. Everything—"

He'd wanted to tell her that everything was going to be fine. And he wanted to tell her so much more. But before he could say anything, Shmi said again, "I love—" Then her eyes closed and her head fell back.

She died in his arms.

Anakin sat there in stunned silence, just holding his mother. *If I'd gotten here sooner, I could have saved her.* He pushed his fingers through Shmi's matted hair. *I won't leave her here. I have to get her back to the speeder bike. But those Tusken guards—*

He remembered the Tusken he'd encountered when he was a boy.

I saved his life!

Earlier, Anakin hadn't questioned the Tuskens' motives. Now, he wondered if they would have taken his mother if they'd known that her son had once saved one of their own. *Or is this how Tuskens say thank you?* He quickly speculated whether the

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Tusken he'd rescued might still be alive, possibly in this very camp. *I should have let him die! I should have!*

He thought of how the Tusken had taken his mother, imagined what she had endured in the past month...

Why would they do this? How could anyone do this?

The answer came to him from the darkest reaches of his own heart. *They did this because they wanted to. They did this because they could.* As his grief transformed into anger, he knew exactly how he was going to dispose of the Tusken guards.

Temporarily leaving his mother's corpse, Anakin Skywalker stepped outside the tent and reactivated his lightsaber.

He didn't stop with the guards.

When Anakin arrived back at the Lars homestead with his mother's blanket-wrapped body, Cliegg Lars, Owen, Beru, Padmé, and C-3PO emerged from the entry dome. They watched in silence as he lifted his dead mother from the bike and carried her toward the dome's doorway. Anakin was in no mood to talk, and he had reconsidered his assessment that the Lars family was made up of "good people."

What's the advantage of being good if you're weak?

His grim, scowling expression locked onto Cliegg Lars, who lowered his gaze.

Perhaps you're wishing you hadn't given up on her so soon?

Without breaking stride, Anakin redirected his glare at Owen and Beru.

Maybe my mother never told you about how to be prepared to take care of things?

Anakin didn't even look at Padmé or the protocol droid as he descended with his mother into the underground dwelling.

Later, Anakin was standing at a workbench in the homestead garage, repairing a part from the swoop bike, when Padmé entered carrying a tray of food. She said, "I brought you something. Are you hungry?"

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Anakin continued to examine the bike part, moving slowly, as if he was slightly dazed. "The shifter broke," he said. "Life seems so much simpler when you're fixing things. I'm good at fixing things. Always was. But I couldn't..." He stopped working and looked at Padmé. "Why'd she have to die? Why couldn't I save her? I know I *could* have." He turned away, looking into a dark corner of the cluttered garage. His rage had momentarily given way to grief.

"Sometimes there are things no one can fix," Padmé said. "You're not all-powerful, Ani."

"Well, I *should* be!" he snarled back at her, causing Padmé to flinch. "Someday I will be," he continued. "I will be the most powerful Jedi ever! I promise you. I will even learn to stop people from dying."

Padmé just stood there, confused and alarmed by his words. "Anakin..."

"It's all Obi-Wan's fault. He's jealous! He's holding me back!" He flung a wrench across the garage. It smashed against the wall and clattered to the floor.

"What's wrong, Ani?"

Still avoiding her gaze, Anakin tried to calm his voice as he said, "I...I killed them. I killed them all. They're dead. Every single one of them." He turned slowly to face Padmé, revealing the tears streaming down his face. "And not just the men, but the women and the children, too. They're like animals, and I slaughtered them like animals!" Then he roared, "I HATE them!"

Anakin began sobbing and slumped down to the floor. Padmé knelt and put her arms around him. She said, "To be angry is to be human."

"I'm a Jedi," Anakin gasped between sobs. "I know I'm better than this."

And yet he also knew something else, something far worse than that he'd allowed himself to give way to his anger.

Killing the Tuskens had given him satisfaction.

Chapter Nine

Anakin knelt before his mother's final resting place, a graveyard outside the Lars compound, where two old headstones stood beside the new one. "I wasn't strong enough to save you, Mom," he said, trying not to choke on his words. *I've failed*, he thought. *Not just as your son, but as a Jedi*. "I wasn't strong enough," he repeated. "But I promise I won't fail again." He rose to his feet. Through clenched teeth, he added, "I miss you so much."

Padmé, Cliegg, Owen, Beru, and C-3PO were gathered behind Anakin. As he moved away from the grave, R2-D2 motored toward the group and emitted a flurry of beeps and whistles.

"R2?" Padmé said, surprised that he had left their starship. "What are you doing here?"

R2-D2 beeped and whistled more.

Seizing the opportunity to act as a translator, C-3PO said, "It seems that he is carrying a message from an Obi-Wan Kenobi. Hmm. Master Ani, does that name mean anything to you?"

The two droids followed Anakin and Padmé into the starship.

Obi-Wan had tracked the bounty hunter—a man named Jango Fett—to the droid foundries on the planet Geonosis, where he'd discovered that the Trade Federation's Viceroy, Nute

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Gunray, was behind the assassination attempts on Padmé. Obi-Wan had also learned that the Trade Federation was scheduled to take delivery of a Geonosian-produced droid army, and that various interstellar commerce factions had allied with Count Dooku's Separatist movement. Although Obi-Wan had managed to transmit this information from Geonosis, his holographic recording ended with him trying to evade a hail of laserfire from enemy droids.

Anakin and Padmé watched the prerecorded message in their starship's cockpit on Tatooine, while the Jedi Council and Chancellor Palpatine simultaneously viewed the relayed transmission on Coruscant. When Obi-Wan's message was over, Jedi Master Mace Windu instructed Anakin to stay where he was with Senator Amidala while the Jedi Council dealt with Count Dooku. "Protect the Senator at all costs," Mace Windu said via holographic transmission. "That is your first priority."

"Understood, Master," Anakin replied. *First I lose my mother, now...Obi-Wan.*

As Mace Windu's hologram faded out, Padmé said, "They'll never get there in time to save him. They have to come halfway across the galaxy." Swiveling in her seat to examine coordinates on the navicomputer console, she said, "Look, Geonosis is less than a parsec away."

"If he's still alive," Anakin said grimly.

"Ani, are you just going to sit here and let him die? He's your friend, your mentor. He's—"

"He's like my father!" Anakin snapped. *The father I never had.* "But you heard Master Windu. He gave me strict orders to stay here."

"He gave you strict orders to protect me," Padmé said as she flicked a series of switches that activated the ship's engines, "and I'm going to help Obi-Wan. If you plan to protect me, you will have to come along."

Anakin grinned.

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As the ship lifted off, carrying Anakin, Padmé, and the two droids away from Tatooine, it occurred to Anakin that they hadn't so much as said good-bye to Clieg, Owen, or Beru. *I didn't have much to say to them anyway*, he thought. He looked at C-3PO, who had belted his sandblasted metal body into a seat behind Anakin, and felt some small sense of accomplishment.

At least I rescued someone I cared about from Tatooine.

Although Obi-Wan Kenobi turned out to be very much alive, Anakin's unauthorized mission to Geonosis was almost a disaster. He and Padmé were captured by the insectoid Geonosians before they could rescue Obi-Wan, and then the duplicitous Count Dooku and the Geonosians sentenced them to death.

And yet to Anakin, all of this amounted to *almost* a disaster, because there had been one bright, significant moment on Geonosis for him and Padmé. After they had been captured and enchained, and were about to be hauled into a giant execution arena, Padmé had faced him and said, "I'm not afraid to die. I've been dying a little bit each day since you came back into my life."

Dying? "What are you talking about?" Anakin asked.

"I love you."

"You love me?" Anakin said incredulously. "I thought that we had decided not to fall in love, that we would be forced to live a lie, and that it would destroy our lives."

"I think our lives are about to be destroyed anyway," Padmé said sadly. "I truly, deeply love you, and before we die I want you to know."

They kissed then, and at that moment, Anakin believed he had more reason to live than ever before.

Anakin, Padmé, and Obi-Wan were nearly killed by monsters in a giant execution arena. Fortunately, their deaths were prevented by the arrival of lightsaber-wielding Jedi, including Mace Windu and Yoda, and an unexpected army of clone soldiers. Although Mace Windu was able to dispose of Jango

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Fett, who had served as the genetic template for the clones, many Jedi perished in the battle against the Geonosian-manufactured droids.

Count Dooku fled the execution arena, and Obi-Wan and Anakin chased him to an abandoned weapons factory in a high rock tower that Dooku had converted into a hangar for his personal starship, a customized solar sailer. With their lightsabers already activated, Obi-Wan and Anakin entered the dark hangar to find the elegantly attired, silver-haired former Jedi as he prepared to escape from Geonosis. Turning to face his pursuers, Dooku wore an expression of mild annoyance at the pair who now stood across the hangar from him.

Even though Dooku had renounced the Jedi order ten years earlier, Anakin noticed that the man had a curved-handled lightsaber clipped to his belt. Anakin snarled, "You're gonna pay for all the Jedi that you killed today, Dooku."

Knowing Dooku's reputation as a swordsman, Obi-Wan kept his eyes on Dooku as he stepped closer to Anakin and said in a low voice, "We'll take him together. Go in slowly on the left."

But Anakin was all out of patience. "I'm taking him now!" he shouted as he ignored Obi-Wan's protests and charged Dooku. He was barely halfway across the hangar's mosaic floor when Dooku, instead of reaching for his lightsaber, raised and aimed his right hand in Anakin's direction.

Anakin screamed and involuntarily squeezed his eyes shut as brilliant blue bolts of lightning suddenly enveloped his body. Overwhelmed by the intense pain, he could not even begin to think how Dooku was controlling and directing the lightning at him. Anakin felt his feet leave the floor, and then he was hurled across the chamber and smashed into the wall. He screamed again as he landed on the hard floor, still feeling the surge of dark energy that Dooku had unleashed upon him. His body felt as if it had been seared, and as he writhed on the floor, he realized smoke was rising from his tunic.

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He struggled to stay conscious. Trying to block out the pain, he was only peripherally aware that Obi-Wan had engaged Dooku in a lightsaber fight. *I should have listened to Obi-Wan!* He thought of Padmé. *I can't die like this!*

As Anakin lay on the floor and struggled to recover, he attempted to open his eyes and felt more agony. It was as if the electric shock was still licking at his eyeballs. For a moment, he wondered if he had been blinded by the lightning.

Have to focus! He concentrated, tried to get his breathing under control. A moment later, his vision returned, allowing him to watch helplessly as Dooku's red-bladed lightsaber slashed at Obi-Wan's left arm and leg. Obi-Wan dropped his lightsaber as he collapsed to the floor.

Smoke was still rising from Anakin's clothes. He watched with mounting horror as Dooku raised his lightsaber and prepared to bring it down on the helpless Obi-Wan.

Finding some unexpected reserve from within himself, Anakin roared as he ignited his lightsaber and leapt across the hangar to block Dooku's death blow. While Obi-Wan's limp form lay beneath the crossed lightsabers, Dooku eyed Anakin and said, "Brave of you, boy. But I would have thought you had learned your lesson."

"I am a slow learner," Anakin said as he maneuvered Dooku away from Obi-Wan's form.

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan shouted. He'd used the Force to retrieve his fallen lightsaber, and managed to toss it to his Padawan. Anakin caught and activated it so that he was now using two lightsabers against his opponent. But only several swift contacts later, Dooku's blade swept through Obi-Wan's weapon, shattering the handle and nearly severing Anakin's fingertips. Anakin still clutched his own weapon in his other hand, and the duel continued across the hangar.

Trying to suppress his anger, Anakin reached out to the Force as his eyes locked on Dooku's. Their lightsabers blurred at the edges of his vision, and he believed the Force would guide him

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to defeat Dooku. But as he continued to meet Dooku's condescending stare, he felt his rage begin to rise again.

And then Dooku made his move, sweeping his blade through Anakin's sword arm, just above the elbow. Anakin shouted and felt his breath go out of him as Dooku used the Force to launch him backward through the air. Then everything went dark.

Anakin didn't know how many minutes had passed as he began to return to consciousness. He felt something shift behind his head, and realized he was lying against Obi-Wan's legs. Obi-Wan pushed himself up from the hangar floor, then helped Anakin rise. Anakin saw Yoda standing in the middle of the hangar. Parts of the ceiling had broken away, and there was rubble all over the floor.

What happened?

Then Anakin noticed Dooku's solar sailer was gone.

"Anakin!" Padmé shouted. She had arrived at the hangar with a squad of clone troopers, and it hurt him to see her anguished expression as she came running toward him, seeing what was left of his right arm. She wrapped her arms carefully around him.

At least you're safe, he thought, wrapping his left arm around her to hold her close. He didn't care that Obi-Wan or Yoda were watching. He was dazed and maimed, and he was afraid if he let go of Padmé, his knees would buckle and he'd pass out again. And so he just stood there, holding her.

In the end, not even Master Yoda had been able to prevent Dooku from fleeing into space, or stop the worlds of the Republic from entering a civil war. The Clone Wars had begun.

To make matters worse, Count Dooku had told Obi-Wan that hundreds of Senators were under the control of a Sith Lord called Darth Sidious. Although the Jedi did not consider Dooku a trustworthy source, they agreed to keep a closer eye on the Senate.

Following his duel with Dooku, Anakin was outfitted with a cybernetic arm, and he escorted Padmé back to Naboo. There,

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on the same terrace by the lake where they had exchanged their first tentative kiss, they arranged a secret meeting with a Naboo holy man. Padmé was dressed in a white gown with flowered trim and Anakin wore his formal Jedi robes. With C-3PO and R2-D2 as their only witnesses, they were married.

Anakin had no idea how long they could keep their marriage a secret, but he didn't care. *She's mine. At last, my beloved Padmé is mine.* It was truly a dream come true. And on their wedding day, it was easy for him to believe that his greatest troubles were behind him.

He never imagined the nightmares that were yet to come.

Chapter Ten

Almost overnight, the Galactic Republic acquired a massive military force that included interstellar battleships, weapon-laden starfighters, and enormous ground vehicles. While Senators argued whether Supreme Chancellor Palpatine had been wrong to conscript and deploy the hastily raised Grand Army of the Republic, more worlds were quick to join Count Dooku's Separatist movement, which had officially named itself the Confederacy of Independent Systems. As Master Yoda had foreseen, the Clone Wars spread like an explosive virus throughout the galaxy.

Although Palpatine had always presented himself as a cautious, unassuming politician, he made it known to all that he would do whatever was necessary to preserve the Republic. Despite his modest protests, the Senate demanded that he stay in office long after his term had expired. But as the Clone Wars escalated, even his most trusted advisors were surprised by his many amendments to the Republic Constitution, which extended his own political powers while limiting the freedom of others.

The Jedi Council reluctantly agreed to allow Jedi to serve as generals to the Grand Army's clone troops. However, not every Jedi was willing to engage in warfare; some chose to serve as healers, and others abandoned the Jedi order entirely.

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Compelled to fight on behalf of the Republic, Obi-Wan Kenobi became a general, and Anakin, like many other Padawans, was promoted to knighthood sooner than expected to accommodate the Grand Army's needs. Although members of the Jedi Council observed that Anakin was still prone to arrogance and impatience, no one disputed the fact that he continued to grow even stronger with the power of the Force.

Lethal droids were not the only adversaries to the Jedi, as Count Dooku had recruited such deadly beings as the Sith aspirant Asajj Ventress and the nearly indestructible Gen'Dai bounty hunter, Durge, to fight on his behalf. Dooku himself had trained Ventress in the art of lightsaber combat, but often ridiculed her preference to wield two lightsabers at the same time. Anakin nearly defeated Ventress on the fourth moon of the gas giant Yavin. One of their duels, in the industrial sector of Coruscant, left him with a deep scar on the right side of his face.

Three years after the Battle of Geonosis, Ventress and Durge no longer posed a threat, but Count Dooku led the Confederacy, and the Jedi were no closer to finding the mysterious Darth Sidious. The Clone Wars raged on.

After destroying a secret Confederacy laboratory on the planet Nelvaan in the Outer Rim, Anakin and Obi-Wan were leaving with R2-D2 in a Republic Star Destroyer when they received an urgent message. R2-D2 plugged into a communications console and projected a hologram of Mace Windu, who said, "Kenobi, Skywalker. Coruscant is under siege, and General Grievous has abducted the Supreme Chancellor. You must return immediately. You must rescue Palpatine."

"Grievous," Anakin snarled as the holographic message ended. Count Dooku's most notorious lieutenant, the cyborg General Grievous commanded the Confederacy's droid armies. Grievous had been trained in lightsaber combat by Dooku himself, and had a penchant for killing Jedi and collecting their lightsabers. Although some Jedi wondered just how much

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Palpatine was trying to end the war, Anakin had come to consider the Republic's leader among his most trusted friends.

I won't let the Chancellor die! Anakin vowed to himself.

Stepping away from R2-D2 and Obi-Wan, Anakin addressed the armored clone troops in the Star Destroyer's hangar. "Battle stations. All crews to their fighters. Prepare to jump into hyperspace. Move!"

Republic Star Destroyers and Confederacy gunships were fully engaged in an explosive battle over the skies of Coruscant when Anakin and Obi-Wan returned from the Outer Rim. Antifighter flak flashed in bright bursts near every ship, and decimated vessels tumbled from orbit and smashed into the spires of the city-covered world below.

Flanked by a squadron of veteran clone aviators and with R2-D2 acting as Anakin's copilot, the two Jedi left their own Star Destroyer in a pair of starfighters and raced into the melee. Blasting droid ships while evading missiles, Anakin and Obi-Wan courageously made their way through the deadly flow of enemy vessels until they infiltrated the Confederate flagship, *Invisible Hand*, on which Supreme Chancellor Palpatine was held hostage by General Grievous.

To increase speed and maneuverability, Jedi starfighters were engineered without shield generators. Although this led some opponents to believe that such starfighters were more vulnerable to attack, most Jedi pilots were adept at using the Force to anticipate, evade, and attack their enemies. Anakin was considered among the top pilots in the Jedi order, but unlike other Jedi, he did not hesitate to rely upon technology to help achieve his goals. The way Anakin saw things, the Force had not been enough to save his own right arm or stop Dooku on Geonosis, and he doubted the war would be won by the Force alone either.

The Jedi moved stealthily through the ship until they reached the *Invisible Hand's* main communications and sensors pod, a lofty

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chamber with expansive windows that provided a 180-degree view of the surrounding space battle. It was in this chamber that they found Supreme Chancellor Palpatine, who sat in a tall chair, his wrists pinned by energy binders to the chair's arms. Palpatine's face was pale, and he did not look relieved to see the Jedi.

"Are you all right?" Anakin asked as he and Obi-Wan approached the Chancellor's seated form.

Palpatine nervously looked past the two Jedi and said, "Count Dooku."

Anakin and Obi-Wan turned and looked up to see the impeccably attired Dooku and two super battle droids step onto an elevated balcony that hugged the aft wall of the chamber. Although Dooku was in his ninth decade, he moved with the grace of a jungle predator. Anakin's mind flashed back to his confrontation with Dooku on Geonosis, when he'd made the mistake of charging Dooku without Obi-Wan right at his side.

Keeping his eyes on Dooku as he addressed Anakin, Obi-Wan said, "This time we will do it together."

"I was about to say that," Anakin said.

Dooku stepped away from his droids, leapt over the balcony's railing, and executed a neat flip before landing a short distance from the Jedi. He reached to his side and drew his lightsaber.

"Get help," Palpatine said urgently from his seat. "You're no match for him. He's a Sith Lord."

Obi-Wan offered an assuring smile. "Chancellor Palpatine, Sith Lords are our specialty." Obi-Wan and Anakin shed their Jedi robes, letting them fall to the floor as they drew their own lightsabers.

"Your swords, please," Dooku urged as he walked toward the Jedi. "We don't want to make a mess of things in front of the Chancellor."

"You won't get away this time, Dooku," Obi-Wan said. He and Obi-Wan ignited their blue-bladed lightsabers and advanced on Dooku, who ignited his own red-bladed weapon. The beams

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of their lightsabers hummed and clashed as they moved across the chamber. Dooku defended himself effortlessly.

On the level above, the two droids didn't budge, but watched silently as the figures came to a momentary standstill. While the three lightsabers continued to blaze, Dooku grinned at his opponents and said, "I've been looking forward to this."

Not intimidated by the elder swordsman, Anakin said, "My powers have doubled since the last time we met, Count."

"Good," Dooku said. "Twice the pride, double the fall."

The Jedi charged once again. Dooku backed up as he parried their blows, then used the Force to throw Obi-Wan to the floor. As Anakin continued his assault on Dooku, forcing him back up the steps to the upper level, Obi-Wan recovered himself and leapt up to rejoin the fight.

The two droids fired at Obi-Wan, but he batted their fired energy bolts back at them and cut them down as he moved fast for Dooku. Unfortunately, Dooku moved faster, extending his left hand toward Obi-Wan as he used the Force to lift the Jedi off his feet while at the same time constricting his throat. As Obi-Wan gasped, Anakin swung at Dooku from behind, but Dooku kicked Anakin's stomach with his left foot, smashing the young Jedi against a nearby wall.

Obi-Wan was still suspended in the air when Dooku gestured again with his hand to send his choking victim sailing across the chamber. Obi-Wan crashed against the railing of an extended balcony, then collapsed like a broken doll to the floor. With another gesture, Dooku used the Force to tear a section of the balcony away from its braces and pin Obi-Wan's unconscious form to the floor.

Master!

Anakin threw himself at Dooku, knocking him from the balcony to the floor below. Leaping down after his quarry, Anakin struck again and again at Dooku until both of their blades were practically locked onto each other.

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"I sense great fear in you, Skywalker," Dooku said. "You have hate. You have anger. But you don't use them."

Anakin grimaced, angrier than before, the blades unlocked, and the duel resumed. Trading blows across the chamber, they came to a stop near the hostage Palpatine. Dooku was using both hands to grip his lightsaber, putting more of his strength into each deadly swing, when Anakin reached out fast with his left hand to catch Dooku's wrists. In the moment that Dooku was temporarily pinned, Anakin's right hand twisted sharply to swing his lightsaber between him and the startled Dooku.

Dooku's lightsaber automatically deactivated as it flew out of his severed hands, which fell to the floor with an ugly flopping sound. His knees buckled, and he dropped to kneel beside his hands. Anakin snatched Dooku's lightsaber from the air, then activated the red blade and crossed it with the blade of his own weapon, angling the blades to either side of his opponent's head. Dooku's eyes were wide and his mouth agape as he stared at the maimed ends of his arms. Because lightsabers cauterize as fast as they cleave through flesh, there was surprisingly little blood.

I got you, Anakin thought, keeping the lightsaber blades close to Dooku's neck.

"Good, Anakin," Palpatine said from his seat. "Good." Unexpectedly, he chuckled.

He almost sounds cheerful. He must be in shock.

Then Palpatine said, "Kill him."

What? Anakin kept his eyes on Dooku, who shifted his trembling gaze to Palpatine.

"Kill him now," Palpatine said.

Dooku looked up at Anakin, who now saw genuine fear in the old, maimed man's eyes. Anakin said, "I shouldn't." His words seemed to give some relief to Dooku, whose panicked expression relaxed slightly as he continued to tremble. *I can be merciful,* Anakin thought as he held Dooku's gaze. *I'm a better Jedi than you ever were.*

"Do it," Palpatine said, practically spitting the words out.

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Fear flickered again in Dooku's eyes, as he suddenly sensed what was coming.

Anakin rapidly uncrossed the blades, cleaving through Dooku's neck. Dooku's body collapsed alongside his hands, while his head rolled and thudded across the floor like an ill-shaped ball. Anakin felt his own heart pounding in his chest as he deactivated the lightsabers, and almost immediately thought, *What have I done?*

"You did well, Anakin," Palpatine said calmly. "He was too dangerous to be kept alive."

"Yes, but he was an unarmed prisoner," Anakin said as he released Palpatine's energy binders. "I shouldn't have done that. It's not the Jedi way."

Rising from the tall seat, Palpatine said, "It is only natural. He cut off your arm, and you wanted revenge. It wasn't the first time, Anakin. Remember what you told me about your mother and the Sand People?"

In the three years since his mother's death, Anakin had convinced himself that he had temporarily lost his mind that night at the Tusken camp. It remained his darkest secret, something he'd never even told Obi-Wan because he knew he would be banished from the Jedi order, and yet he'd felt compelled to take Palpatine into his confidence. Anakin grimaced at the memory of the slaughtered Tusken. The desire to kill them had been beyond his control. *Killing Dooku wasn't the same. I knew it was wrong, but I did it anyway.*

Palpatine said, "Now we must leave before more security droids arrive."

Anakin ran to Obi-Wan, who remained pinned under the broken section of the balcony. Outside the chamber's large windows a ripple of fiery bursts indicated the space battle had intensified.

"Anakin, there's no time," Palpatine said as Anakin pulled his Master free from the wreckage. "We must get off this ship before

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it's too late." The *Invisible Hand* shuddered violently as it was wracked by a series of explosions.

Checking Obi-Wan's vital signs, Anakin said, "He seems to be all right."

"Leave him," Palpatine commanded, "or we'll never make it."

"His fate will be the same as ours," Anakin said, for once refusing to obey the Chancellor. He lifted and slung Obi-Wan's body over his shoulders and ran with Palpatine to the lift tube.

Anakin and Palpatine were still aboard the *Invisible Hand* when Obi-Wan recovered. Along with R2-D2, they were briefly apprehended by General Grievous but managed to evade his metallic clutches. Unfortunately, Grievous launched all the escape pods and fled into space as the battle-damaged *Invisible Hand* began to tumble through Coruscant's upper atmosphere. Although the crash landing was bone-jarring for Palpatine and the Jedi, Anakin's incredible piloting skills delivered them, and what little remained of the Confederate flagship, to a landing strip.

Mace Windu, Senator Bail Organa of Alderaan, and C-3PO were among the dignitaries who greeted Palpatine and Anakin at the Chancellor's private landing platform at the Senate Offices while Obi-Wan returned to the Jedi Temple. After speaking briefly with Bail Organa as they entered the office building, Anakin found Padmé discreetly waiting for him in the shadows of a tall column. He hadn't seen her in months.

Although Anakin was concerned that General Grievous was still at large and had assumed leadership of the Confederacy, he forgot his troubles as he embraced Padmé.

But she seemed different; she had something very important to tell him.

Chapter Eleven

“Ani, I’m pregnant.”

Still in the shadows of the Senate Offices hallway, Anakin suddenly felt light-headed. Padmé stared into his eyes, waiting for him to say something. “That’s—” he began, then sighed and looked away. With the sudden realization that their marriage could not be a secret much longer, his first thoughts were of how this development would impact on their lives. *Padmé might be recalled to Naboo, and I’ll be cast out in disgrace from the Jedi order. It will be a scandal....*

Then his gaze met Padmé’s again, and he saw how frightened she was.

“Well,” he said, “that’s won—that’s wonderful!” He smiled.

Less than assured, Padmé said, “What are we going to do?”

“We’re not going to worry about anything right now,” Anakin said, holding her tight. “All right? This is a happy moment. The happiest moment of my life.”

Later that night, in Padmé’s apartment in Galactic City, Anakin had a nightmare so terrible that he nearly shouted when he awoke. He tried to ease himself out of bed quietly so Padmé would not be aware of his absence, but she woke up too and

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found him standing on the terrace, watching the air traffic glide past her apartment windows.

“What’s bothering you?” Padmé asked.

“Nothing,” he said. Padmé was wearing the good-luck charm that Anakin had carved for her shortly after they’d met. He reached out to touch the charm and said, “I remember when I gave this to you.”

Padmé gave him a hard stare and said, “How long is it going to take us to be honest with each other?”

Anakin took a deep breath. “It was a dream,” he admitted.

“Bad?”

“Like the ones I used to have about my mother...just before she died.”

“And?”

“And it was about you.”

Padmé moved closer to Anakin and said, “Tell me.”

Anakin moved a short distance away. “It was only a dream,” he said, but as soon as the words had been uttered, he felt them to be untrue.

It wasn’t just a dream. It was real, and it’s going to happen.

He turned to face Padmé and said, “You die in childbirth.”

Padmé tried not to cringe. “And the baby?”

“I don’t know.”

Padmé moved again to Anakin’s side. “It was only a dream,” she said, now trying to convince herself as well as placate Anakin.

“I won’t let this one become real,” Anakin vowed.

“This baby will change our lives,” Padmé said. “I doubt the queen will continue to allow me to serve in the Senate. And if the Council discovers you’re the father, you’ll be expelled.”

“I—I know,” Anakin stammered, trying to push away those realities. “I know.”

“Do you think Obi-Wan might be able to help us?”

“We don’t need his help,” Anakin said, and glowered as he imagined his Master’s reprimands. When he noticed that Padmé

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looked frightened by his expression, Anakin shifted his features into a gentle smile and said, "Our baby is a blessing."

Anakin thought about the dream again, hoping that it wasn't an accurate depiction of things to come, but somehow knowing in his heart that it was. Fortunately, he knew someone who was something of an expert on premonitions.

"Premonitions?" Master Yoda said. "Premonitions. Hmm."

It was the morning after his nightmare about Padmé, and Anakin was in Yoda's quarters in the Jedi Temple. They were seated across from each other, and shafts of bright sunlight sifted through the blinds that lined the windows of the sparsely furnished room.

Yoda said, "These visions you have—"

"They're of pain, suffering. Death."

"Yourself you speak of, or someone you know?"

Anakin was reluctant to offer too many details, but admitted, "Someone."

"Close to you?"

Anakin lowered his gaze, and felt almost ashamed as he answered, "Yes."

Raising a cautionary finger, Yoda fixed Anakin with a penetrating gaze and said, "Careful you must be when sensing the future, Anakin. The fear of loss is a path to the dark side."

Anakin recalled the dreams that had preceded his mother's death, and then of his failure to save her. Returning Yoda's gaze, he said flatly, "I won't let these visions come true, Master Yoda."

"Death is a natural part of life," Yoda explained. "Rejoice for those around you who transform into the Force. Mourn them, do not. Miss them, do not. Attachment leads to jealousy. The shadow of greed that is."

Hoping to stay on the right path this time, Anakin said, "What must I do, Master Yoda?"

"Train yourself to let go of everything you fear to lose."

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I might be able to let go of being a Jedi, Anakin thought, but I can't let go of Padmé. I just can't. I love her too much.

I won't let her die. I won't.

Soon after Anakin's meeting with Yoda, Palpatine confided to Anakin that he feared the Jedi Council wanted more control than they already had in the Republic. Anakin found this difficult to believe, but agreed to become Palpatine's personal representative on the Council. Because only Jedi Masters served on the Council, Anakin assumed that his appointment would guarantee his promotion to Master, and felt insulted when the Council insisted that he remain a Knight. After his first awkward meeting with the Council, Anakin learned from Obi-Wan that the Council wanted him to report on all of Chancellor Palpatine's dealings. It seemed that Anakin was the *only* Jedi who trusted Palpatine.

Palpatine suspects the Council is up to something, and the Council wants me to spy on Palpatine! Who should I trust? Anakin tried talking with Padmé, but when she expressed her concern that democracy no longer existed in the Republic, he accused her of sounding like a Separatist. *Is she turning against me too?!*

Later that night, Palpatine summoned Anakin to meet him in the Chancellor's private box at the Galaxies Opera House. There, while watching a troupe of Mon Calamari perform a zero-gravity ballet within immense spheres of shimmering water, Palpatine informed Anakin that Clone Intelligence Units had discovered that General Grievous was hiding in the Utapau system. After dismissing his aides from the box, Palpatine further confided that he had come to suspect that the Jedi Council wanted to control the Republic, and was plotting to betray him.

Palpatine said, "They asked you to spy on me, didn't they?"

Squirming in his seat beside the Chancellor, Anakin replied, "I don't, uh...I don't know what to say."

"Remember back to your early teachings," Palpatine continued. "All those who gain power are afraid to lose it. Even the Jedi."

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No, that's not true, Anakin thought. "The Jedi use their power for good," he insisted.

"Good is a point of view, Anakin," Palpatine said calmly. "The Sith and the Jedi are similar in almost every way, including their quest for greater power."

That's not true, either. "The Sith rely on their passion for their strength," Anakin said. "They think inwards, only about themselves."

"And the Jedi don't?" Palpatine asked, lifting his eyebrows high to convey his belief that the answer was as plain as his face.

"The Jedi are selfless," Anakin countered. "They only care about others."

There was applause from the audience, and Anakin and Palpatine directed their attention to the performers. Palpatine said, "Did you ever hear the tragedy of Darth Plagueis the Wise?"

"No," Anakin admitted.

"I thought not," Palpatine said smugly. "It's not a story the Jedi would tell you. It's a Sith legend. Darth Plagueis was a Dark Lord of the Sith, so powerful and so wise he could use the Force to influence the midi-chlorians to create...life." He slowly turned his gaze to Anakin before he continued. "He had such a knowledge of the dark side that he could even keep the ones he cared about from dying."

Anakin thought immediately of Padmé, and of his most recent nightmares, and felt a tingling sensation along his spine. He said, "He could actually...save people from death?"

"The dark side of the Force is a pathway to many abilities some consider to be *unnatural*."

Anakin thought about Darth Plagueis, wondering just how much of the legend might be true. He said, "Wh—What happened to him?"

Looking away from Anakin, Palpatine answered slowly, "He became so powerful, the only thing he was afraid of was losing his power, which eventually, of course, he did. Unfortunately, he

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taught his apprentice everything he knew. Then his apprentice killed him in his sleep. It's ironic. He could save others from death, but not himself."

Because the Chancellor was such a learned man and had discussed the ongoing hunt for Darth Sidious with members of the Jedi Council, Anakin wasn't curious about how he might have learned such a bizarre story about the Sith. Anakin only wanted to know one thing.

"Is it possible to learn this power?" he asked.

Raising his eyebrows, Palpatine turned to once again lock his gaze on Anakin and said, "Not from a Jedi."

Interlude

Twenty-three years after the end of the Clone Wars, Darth Vader had no difficulty recalling Anakin Skywalker's meeting with Supreme Chancellor Palpatine at the Opera House. Although he had not yet realized that Palpatine was really the Sith Lord Darth Sidious, it was at that particular moment that Anakin Skywalker decided he must learn the secrets of the Sith.

At the time, Anakin had convinced himself that he only wanted to gain the powers that would help him save his wife. He hadn't wanted to take the path to the dark side. In fact, he had continued to behave nobly after that meeting at the opera. When the Jedi Council insulted him yet again by selecting Obi-Wan to hunt down General Grievous on Utapau, Anakin apologized for his arrogance. And after he learned that Palpatine was the Sith Lord who had slain Darth Plagueis, and realized that the Chancellor had no intention of stepping down from his position of power after the death of General Grievous, Anakin reported his discovery to Mace Windu, who led a team of Jedi Masters to apprehend Palpatine. Anakin had done the right thing.

But because Anakin believed that the only way he could save Padmé was by gaining Palpatine's arcane knowledge, he had been unable to let Mace Windu kill the Sith Lord. And so he had allowed Palpatine to unleash Sith Lightning on Mace Windu, and chose to betray all the Jedi on Coruscant, and pledged himself to Palpatine.

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As the Sith Lord's new apprentice, he had taken the name Darth Vader before he set out to kill every Jedi who remained at the Jedi Temple. Now, so many years later, Vader reflected on all the Jedi he killed that day. Remembering the stunned expressions of Mace Windu as he fell from Palpatine's office window and the screams of the Jedi younglings and their teachers, he felt no remorse. Just as he believed he had done his best to be a dutiful Jedi, he believed his actions as Palpatine's apprentice were even more righteous.

Smoke had been still billowing from the Jedi Temple when Vader traveled to the volcanic world of Mustafar to kill the Separatist leaders in their hideout. Meanwhile, Palpatine initiated an order for all off-world clone troops to kill their Jedi generals, and then informed the Senate that the Separatists had been defeated and the Jedi rebellion had been foiled. Joyous cheers had accompanied Palpatine's declaration that the Republic would be reorganized into the first Galactic Empire.

After killing all the Separatist leaders, Palpatine's new apprentice had stepped outside the mountain fortress on Mustafar to gaze at the blazing lava rivers below. He would not mourn for the lives he had taken. But for the loss of his former self, the boy who had dreamed of becoming a Jedi, he was unable to hold back the tears that streamed down his cheeks.

Anakin Skywalker was gone. Or was he? After all, Padmé had fallen in love with Anakin, not Darth Vader.

He had not anticipated that Padmé, traveling with C-3PO, would follow him to Mustafar and refute the righteousness of his actions. Nor had he foreseen that Obi-Wan would survive the Jedi purge, and that the deceitful Padmé would bring him with her. Despite his powers and years of attunement to Obi-Wan, his rage had blocked his ability to sense his former Master's presence on Mustafar until he saw the Jedi standing in the hatch of Padmé's starship.

He also never imagined that Obi-Wan possessed the strength to bring him down so brutally.

Chapter Twelve

“You were the Chosen One!” Obi-Wan shouted down at what was left of Anakin Skywalker, who writhed at the bottom of a slope of black sand at the edge of a lava river on Mustafar. Their exhausting duel had carried them far from the landing pad where Padmé’s ship had arrived, and where Anakin had used the Force to choke his seemingly treacherous wife.

But now the duel was over. With a single sweep of his lightsaber, Obi-Wan had severed his former Padawan’s legs at the knees and also his left arm.

As Anakin struggled to raise his head from the smoldering sand, his eyes blazed with fury as he glared at Obi-Wan. *I won’t die like this! I’m still stronger than you!*

“It was said you would destroy the Sith, not join them!” Obi-Wan continued. “Bring balance to the Force, not leave it in darkness!”

Feeling the intense heat permeating his torn tunic, Anakin sighted his fallen lightsaber lying a short distance away. Too stunned and dazed to focus his powers, he watched with rage as Obi-Wan bent down to pick up the lightsaber, then took it with him as he began walking up the slope.

“I hate you!” Anakin roared, keeping his eyes focused on the departing figure.

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Obi-Wan stopped in his tracks and turned one final time to face the ruined, seething monster. “You were my brother, Anakin,” Obi-Wan said. “I loved you.”

Anakin’s clothes caught fire, and he was suddenly engulfed in flames. His screams were filled with anger as well as pain, not unlike that of any entirely helpless creature. His instinct was to roll and put out the flames, but because of his wounds and the red-hot stones beneath his ravaged head and torso, all he could do was burn and burn.

Obi-Wan walked off, leaving Anakin to die. Some-how, through his agony, Anakin felt one last flicker of Obi-Wan’s presence before the Jedi receded from view.

Anakin kept screaming.

The flames finally burned out.

Anakin’s mechanical right arm dug into the sand.

He pulled, and slid a few millimeters up the slope.

Again!

With each movement, hot volcanic shards scraped and tore at his roasted flesh. It took all of his concentration to shift his scorched remains up the slope and away from the lava river.

He moaned. Only his powers kept him from blacking out.

Again!

Only his hatred for Obi-Wan made him want to live another day.

Anakin—he still thought of himself as Anakin—heard the engine of an arriving starship travel over his position. He had no idea how much time had passed before he heard a clone trooper’s voice call out, “Your majesty, this way.”

Then he heard Palpatine’s voice, “There he is. He’s still alive.”

Anakin’s blackened torso went completely limp as he finally allowed darkness to sweep over him.

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Anakin awoke on an operating table, surrounded by droids. The recently appointed Emperor Palpatine had brought him to a surgical reconstruction center on Coruscant, and the droids were busily attaching robotic limbs to his quivering torso, which was strapped to the table by strong metal belts. The droids were working fast to maintain the precious midi-chlorians that existed in Anakin's blood and tissue. To prevent the midi-chlorians from becoming thinned by intrusive chemicals, the droids were working without anesthetics.

Anakin felt everything.

He felt each cold metal blade that sliced into his hideously scarred flesh to allow more tools to probe and stabilize his damaged internal organs. He squirmed as shattered bones were replaced by plastoid, and cringed as lasers grafted the new limbs into place. At some point, he overheard a surgical droid explaining to Palpatine that he would require a special helmet and backpack to cycle air in and out of his damaged lungs.

Despite this damage, throughout the entire procedure, he never stopped screaming.

Finally stabilized, Anakin lay quietly on the table to which he was still secured. He was clad in a gleaming black life-support suit with a lighted control function panel set across his chest. He watched as a robot mechanism above his head slowly lowered a black mask with oval vision receptors and a triangular respiratory vent over his face, while another mechanism placed a helmet over his skull. The helmet and mask locked onto each other as they simultaneously bolted to the armored ring that wrapped around his neck. Fully encased within the pressurized suit, he heard a labored, mechanical rasp, then realized it was the sound of his own breathing.

The table tilted, raising Anakin's restrained body to a standing position. From the shadows of the operating room, the hooded Emperor stepped forward and said, "Lord Vader. Can you hear me?"

Vader? That's right...I'm Darth Vader. Anakin is gone.

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Vader exhaled, then said, “Yes, Master.” The mask’s vocabulator had transformed his voice into a commanding baritone. He still felt weak, so it was with some difficulty that he slowly turned his head, adjusting his vision through the helmet to better see the Emperor. The Emperor’s face was gnarled and twisted, deformed by the Sith lightning that had been briefly deflected by Mace Windu during their battle.

“Where is Padmé?” Vader said in his new voice. After everything that had happened, he was still concerned for her, still loved her, still wanted to save her life. “Is she safe? Is she all right?”

In his most sympathetic tone, Palpatine said, “It seems, in your anger, you killed her.”

“I? I couldn’t have,” Vader said with disbelief. *I loved her! I did everything I could to save*—his mind’s voice sounded strange to him, weaker than the synthesized roll of thunder that emitted from his mask. He recalled choking Padmé on Mustafar, watching her body crumple and fall on the landing pad.

I didn’t mean to—

Vader snarled, “She was alive. I felt it!”

Palpatine took a cautious step backward as Vader moaned with grief and rage. Around the laboratory, equipment and droids began to rupture and burst as Vader lashed out in all directions with his Force powers. There was a loud snap of metal as he tore his left arm free from the table, then his right. He lurched forward on alloy legs that were fitted into cumbersome boots until he stood at the edge of the surgical floor. And somehow, through all his anger, he suddenly sensed at least one truth: Padmé was dead, along with their unborn child.

“No!” he bellowed so loud and long that his cry echoed off the walls. Behind his mask, he squeezed his eyes shut in an effort to hold back the tears that he was physically unable to wipe away.

But no tears came. He didn’t know whether the surgical droids had altered or removed his tear ducts, and he was beyond caring. All he knew for certain was that Padmé was gone from

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him forever...and that there were more than a few Jedi still waiting to be killed.

Devoid of love for anyone, and unable to feel the touch of anything through his gloved, cybernetic fingers, Darth Vader was finally ready to fully embrace the dark side.

And so he did.

Chapter Thirteen

Darth Vader's earliest missions involved tracking down the Jedi who had survived the purge. He investigated every reported sighting, traveled to many remote worlds to hunt his quarry, and killed every Jedi he found. No reports led to Obi-Wan or Yoda, but Vader remained ever vigilant.

With every passing day, Vader distanced himself from the Jedi he had been. Where Anakin Skywalker had been influenced by traumatic circumstances, Vader shaped himself by inflicting pain on others. Unfortunately, because of his artificial arms, he was unable to conjure Sith Lightning or be invulnerable to it. He would always be weaker than the Emperor.

Few people were aware of what had become of Anakin Skywalker, but it was not long before nearly everyone in the Galactic Empire had heard some rumor or stray fact about Palpatine's new servant. One month after Palpatine became Emperor, a story circulated that Vader had tracked down a nest of fifty Jedi traitors and killed every one of them by himself. Eyewitnesses described him as a wraithlike being who seemed to possess Jedi powers and wielded a lightsaber, but he was definitely not a Jedi. After all, the Jedi may have attempted to overthrow the Republic, but they had never been known to strangle their opponents.

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Some suspected Darth Vader was a droid engineered to carry out the Emperor's will. Others suggested that he might have once been a professional gladiator or bounty hunter. There was even speculation that he might be a well-known public figure who had assumed the name "Darth Vader" and wore his face-concealing helmet to hide his true identity.

Vader himself did nothing to reveal his personal history. As far as he was concerned, the only thing people had to know about him was that he answered only to the Emperor.

As the Emperor's lieutenant, Vader carried out his Master's directives with lethal precision. Besides hunting Jedi, he supervised the expansion of the Imperial Navy and enforced every new law—many of which promoted the hatred of nonhumans—to bring greater power to the Empire. Those who opposed or disappointed Vader wound up dead or enslaved, and even Palpatine's most ardent supporters regarded the masked, shadowy cyborg with dread. In a short time, his very name became synonymous with terror.

The Emperor reorganized the Galactic Senate as the Imperial Senate, so he could continue to monitor and manipulate the representatives of the worlds he now controlled. Vader accompanied the Emperor to the more important Senate functions, which were often attended by Senator Bail Organa of Alderaan, among others. During the Clone Wars, Anakin Skywalker had, for a time, shared Senator Amidala's regard for Organa as a rare, honorable politician, but to Darth Vader, the man was as insignificant as a common insect. Like most people, Organa directed his gaze elsewhere when Vader was present.

After allocating the more mundane responsibilities of government to paranoid administrators, the Emperor made fewer public appearances, which allowed him to devote more of his time to studying the dark side of the Force in his palace on Coruscant. In time, Vader's looming form became the ultimate icon of Imperial authority.

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But the Emperor never let Vader forget who was in charge. Over time, they had many variations of the same conversation, which usually began with the Emperor's taunting question: "Are you afraid of death, Lord Vader?"

"No, Master."

"Then why do you go on living?"

"To learn to become more powerful, Master."

"Do you seek such power so you might try to strike me down?"

"You are my path to power, Master. I need you."

"Yes, my apprentice. Remember your place, and that you have much to learn."

Vader eventually created his own private retreat, Bast Castle, on the storm-scoured planet Vjun, where Count Dooku had once taken refuge during the Clone Wars. On Vjun, Vader conducted his own studies of the dark side. He had no doubt that the Emperor knew what he wanted more than anything: the power to kill his Master. But because Palpatine was so incredibly powerful, and despite several attempts, Vader learned that he had no reason to believe he could ever defeat the elder Sith Lord.

As the years passed, the Empire expanded by conquering more worlds. While cloned soldiers were still utilized for the Imperial Navy, humans also began serving as enlisted officers or were conscripted into duty as technicians, pilots, and stormtroopers.

Although Anakin Skywalker had never had any personal exchanges with the bounty hunter Jango Fett, Darth Vader did become familiar with Fett's cloned "son," Boba Fett, who had inherited his father's armor, weapons, and starship. As Boba Fett gained a well-deserved reputation as the best bounty hunter in the galaxy, it was inevitable that Vader would occasionally retain him for clandestine assignments.

Vader also supervised secret operations on numerous worlds. To enlist deadly Noghri warriors to his cause, he came to the aid

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of their planet *after* he had covertly poisoned it with life-inhibiting toxins. When an Imperial research station accidentally released a lethal bioagent on the planet Falleen, Vader commanded his soldiers to fire turbolasers at the contaminated world, killing over two hundred thousand Falleen natives.

Of all the operations that Darth Vader oversaw, the most important was the construction of the Death Star, a moon-sized battle station that, when finished, would be equipped with a superlaser capable of destroying entire planets. Conceived by one of the Empire's highest-ranking officers, Grand Moff Wilhuff Tarkin, and originally designed on Geonosis, the Death Star promised to be the Empire's ultimate weapon. As part of Tarkin's doctrine of Rule by Fear, the battle station would strike such terror throughout the galaxy that no world would dare defy or disobey an Imperial command.

As Palpatine had foreseen, the Empire *did* have its enemies. One particular underground movement—the Alliance to Restore the Republic, more commonly known as the Rebel Alliance—proved to be the most irritating. Although Imperial officials were certain that the Rebels had established a secret base, the base's location remained unknown.

Nineteen years after the end of the Clone Wars and the birth of the Empire, the Rebel Alliance attacked an Imperial convoy in the Toprawa system in the Outer Rim. Darth Vader immediately realized that it had been a diversionary tactic, and that the Rebels' real goal was to infiltrate an Imperial research station on Toprawa.

The Rebels had stolen the plans for the Death Star.

Chapter Fourteen

Darth Vader had encountered Bail Organa's daughter, Princess Leia, at several occasions in recent years. The first time had been on Coruscant, before she had become a Senator, when she and her father had been standing in a receiving line to meet the Emperor at the Imperial Palace. Like most people, she had trembled in the Emperor's presence, and had given Vader no reason to assume she might pose any threat. Most recently, he had seen her and one of her officers, Captain Antilles, on the planet Ralltiir, where the Princess had claimed to be working as a goodwill ambassador, hoping to deliver medical supplies to Ralltiir's High Council. Because her recent movements had placed her in areas where there had been Rebel activity, Vader had made sure that her old Corellian Corvette—Imperials had given the make its nickname "Blockade Runner" because of its evasive qualities—did not leave Ralltiir without a tiny stowaway homing device.

After learning that the Rebels had attacked an Imperial convoy in the Toprawa system, Vader traveled swiftly there. He was standing beside his aide, the black-uniformed Commander Praji, on the bridge of the Imperial Star Destroyer *Devastator* in orbit of Toprawa, when a small blip that represented an incoming ship appeared on a sensor screen. Although the ship

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was not broadcasting an identification number, a homing signal indicated it was Princess Leia's Blockade Runner.

Vader was not surprised.

Seconds later, an Imperial communications officer looked up from his monitor and said, "Commander, scrambled transmissions are being sent from the planet."

Vader turned his helmet to face Praji and said, "The starship that just entered the system. Detain it."

Praji moved to a communications console to open a line to the Blockade Runner and spoke into a comlink, "Unidentified ship. Heave to at once and prepare for security search and interrogation!"

"This is the *Tantive IV*," a man's voice answered from the comlink, and Vader immediately recognized the speaker as Captain Antilles. "We have an extravehicular malfunction. A maintenance unit is working on it now." After a moment's pause, Antilles continued, "We are a consular ship on a diplomatic mission and will clear this system as soon as we have effected repairs."

Commander Praji looked to Vader, who gave a single approving nod. Returning to the comlink, Praji replied, "We acknowledge your transmissions, *Tantive IV*. The *Devastator* will hold fire. Maintain your present course and prepare to receive Imperial investigators."

A few seconds later, Antilles responded, "Imperial cruiser *Devastator*, we are on a diplomatic mission and are not to be detained or diverted."

Praji quickly examined a sensor screen. "*Tantive IV* has raised its energy shields and is accelerating out of orbit."

"After them," Vader ordered, confident that the Blockade Runner would not escape.

As the *Devastator's* engines roared to life, Praji spoke again into the comlink. "*Tantive IV*, this is the *Devastator*. Our sensors indicate you have intercepted illegal transmissions in this solar system. Heave to or we'll open fire!"

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When Vader saw that the Blockade Runner was maintaining its course, he said calmly, "Shoot for minimum damage."

The *Devastator*'s cannons launched long streaks of energized bolts that hammered at the small fleeing ship's shields. A moment later, the *Tantive IV*'s engines flared and the ship vanished into hyperspace.

Every spacer knew that it was impossible to track another ship through hyperspace, the dimension that allowed for travel at faster than lightspeed.

On the *Devastator*, Commander Praji consulted a sensor screen to locate the homing device. "Lord Vader, they're heading for the Tatooine system."

Tatooine! Vader appeared impassive, but behind his mask, he clenched his teeth and seethed. The very thought of Tatooine released a small flood of distasteful memories. Regaining his composure, Vader said, "Plot a course."

"Yes, my Lord."

By the time the *Tantive IV* reached the Tatooine system, the *Devastator* was right behind it. The Blockade Runner returned laserfire as it reached Tatooine's orbit, but was overwhelmingly outgunned by the Imperial Star Destroyer. After the Star Destroyer blasted away the Blockade Runner's primary sensor array and starboard shield projector, the smaller ship was effectively crippled.

An Imperial tractor beam drew the *Tantive IV* into the *Devastator*'s main hangar, and stormtroopers armed with blaster rifles were dispatched into the captured vessel. Several stormtroopers were shot down by the *Tantive IV*'s crew upon entry, but the steady stream of unrelenting white-armored Imperial soldiers managed to secure the ship within minutes.

When the blaster fight was over, Darth Vader boarded the *Tantive IV*. The white-walled corridors were scorched, the air was heavy with the scent of blaster fumes, and the floor was littered with the bodies of fallen stormtroopers as well as Rebel troops.

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Vader moved forward through the corridor like a malevolent shadow.

Captain Antilles had survived the Imperial assault and was escorted by stormtroopers to the ship's operations forum, where Vader was waiting for him. Vader wrapped his black-gloved fingers around Antilles's neck as an Imperial officer rushed up and announced, "The Death Star plans are not in the main computer."

Vader turned his visor to gaze at Captain Antilles. "Where are those transmissions you intercepted?" Without effort, the Sith Lord slowly raised his arm and lifted Antilles off the floor. "What have you done with those plans?"

Gasping, Antilles answered, "We intercepted no transmissions. Aaah...this is a consular ship. We're on a diplomatic mission."

Vader tightened his grip and said, "If this is a consular ship...where is the Ambassador?"

When Antilles did not answer, Vader decided the interrogation was over. The Dark Lord gave a sharp squeeze, instantly breaking Antilles's neck. Vader threw the corpse against the wall, and then turned to a stormtrooper.

"Commander," Vader said, "tear this ship apart until you've found those plans, and bring me the passengers. I want them alive!"

Minutes after the stormtroopers had begun their search for the passengers, Vader was informed that Princess Leia had been apprehended.

"Darth Vader," Leia addressed her captor. Her wrists were secured in binders and she ignored the numerous stormtroopers who also stood in the narrow corridor of the *Tantive IV*. Bravely staring straight into the dark lenses of the Sith Lord's helmet, she continued, "Only you could be so bold. The Imperial Senate will not sit still for this. When they hear you've attacked a diplomatic—"

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"Don't act so surprised, Your Highness," Vader interrupted. "You weren't on any mercy mission this time. Several transmissions were beamed to this ship by Rebel spies. I want to know what happened to the plans they sent you."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Leia replied tersely. "I'm a member of the Imperial Senate on a diplomatic mission to Alderaan..."

"You are a part of the Rebel Alliance...and a traitor," Vader snarled. "Take her away!"

As the stormtroopers led Leia from her ship to the Star Destroyer, a black-uniformed, hawk-nosed Imperial officer named Daine Jir trailed alongside Vader as the Sith Lord wound through the corridors, searching for some sign that might lead him to the stolen plans. "Holding her is dangerous," said the outspoken Jir. "If word of this gets out, it could generate sympathy for the Rebellion in the Senate."

"I have traced the Rebel spies to here," Vader said without concern. "Now she is my only link to finding their secret base."

Jir must have been aware of the Princess's reputation, for he added, "She'll die before she'll tell you anything."

"Leave that to me," Vader said. "Send a distress signal and then inform the Senate that all aboard were killed!"

As Vader arrived at a corridor intersection, Commander Praji stopped him and said, "Lord Vader, the battle station plans are not aboard this ship! And no transmissions were made. An escape pod was jettisoned during the fighting, but no life-forms were aboard."

Feeling his anger rise, Vader said, "She must have hidden the plans in the escape pod. Send a detachment down to retrieve them. See to it personally, Commander. There'll be no one to stop us this time."

"Yes, sir," said Praji.

"And send detachments to secure the planet's spaceports," Vader added. "No ship is to leave Tatooine without Imperial authorization."

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Vader stepped to a viewport and gazed down at the sand planet. It looked just as barren as he remembered it.

To think that I lived there once...that it was my home before the Jedi came and took me away. My mother breathed her last on this world, and for years I felt such...agonizing loss.

Now I feel nothing. This world means as much to me as a speck of dust, and all its inhabitants might as well be dust too.

As he returned to the *Devastator*, Vader considered the fact that Tatooine *could* be reduced to dust by the Death Star. He wondered if watching the sand planet's obliteration might bring him any pleasure. It was a possibility he wouldn't rule out.

Chapter Fifteen

An orb that was 160 kilometers in diameter, the Death Star was the size of a Class IV moon and was the largest starship ever built. Its quadanium steel outer hull had two prominent features: a concave superlaser focus lens set into the upper hemisphere, and an equatorial trench that contained ion engines, hyperdrives, and hangar bays. Besides its superlaser, which was not yet fully operational, the Death Star's weaponry included more than 10,000 turbolaser batteries, 2,500 laser cannons, and 2,500 ion cannons. Its hangars contained 7,000 Twin Ion Engine starfighters and more than 20,000 military and transport vessels. The battle station's crew, troops, and pilots numbered over one million.

The Death Star did not in any way impress Darth Vader.

After returning from the Tatooine system with Princess Leia as his prisoner, Vader and the hollow-cheeked Grand Moff Tarkin entered a Death Star conference room where a meeting was already in progress. Admiral Motti, the senior Imperial commander in charge of operations on the Death Star, General Tagge of the Imperial Army, and five other high-ranking Imperial officials sat around a table and listened as Tarkin announced that the Emperor had dissolved the Imperial Senate,

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and assured them that fear of the Death Star would keep the local star systems in line.

While General Tagge maintained concern that the Rebel Alliance might use the stolen Death Star plans to their advantage, Admiral Motti snidely asserted that any attack against the Death Star would be a useless gesture. "This station is now the ultimate power in the universe," Motti said. "I suggest we use it."

"Don't be too proud of this technological terror you've constructed," Vader cautioned. "The ability to destroy a planet is insignificant next to the power of the Force."

Sneering at the Sith Lord, Motti said, "Don't try to frighten us with your sorcerer's ways, Lord Vader. Your sad devotion to that ancient religion has not helped you conjure up the stolen data tapes or given you clairvoyance enough to find the Rebels' hidden fort—"

Motti stopped speaking and reached to his throat as Vader made a pinching movement with his own gloved hand from across the meeting room. "I find your lack of faith disturbing," Vader said.

"Enough of this!" Tarkin snapped. "Vader, release him!"

Although Vader answered only to the Emperor, it was the Emperor's command that he serve Tarkin on the Death Star. "As you wish," Vader said as he lowered his hand, releasing his telekinetic grip on Motti's throat.

Gasping for air, Motti slumped forward onto the table. Tarkin said, "This bickering is pointless. Lord Vader will provide us with the location of the Rebel fortress by the time this station is operational. We will then crush the Rebellion with one swift stroke!"

After the meeting, Vader was informed that he had an incoming message from the Tatooine system. He had already been notified that Commander Praji's stormtrooper squad had learned that the *Tantive IV*'s missing escape pod had carried two droids to Tatooine's surface, and that the droids had been picked

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up by a Jawa sandcrawler. Vader walked over to a communications console, where a holoprojector flickered to life and projected an image of two fully armed Imperial sandtroopers standing beside a middle-aged man and woman who wore robes and were kneeling on the ground. Near the four figures, there was a partial view of a structure, which Vader recognized as an entry dome for a desert dwelling.

Addressing the sandtrooper squad leader, Vader said, "Report via closed circuit."

"Lord Vader," said one of the sandtroopers, adjusting a control on his helmet so that only Vader could hear his voice. "The Jawas sold a protocol droid and an astromech to these moisture farmers, but both droids are gone."

Moisture farmers? Intrigued, Vader examined the holograms of the kneeling couple and said, "The farmers' names?"

"Owen and Beru Lars, sir," the sandtrooper responded. "They say they don't know where the droids are, but it looks like a landspeeder is missing from their garage."

Owen and Bern, Vader recalled. The resolution of their holograms was clear enough that he could make out their worn, weathered features. Neither of them appeared to be comfortable having blaster rifles aimed at their backs. Remembering how they'd looked on the day Anakin Skywalker had met them, Vader thought, *The years have not been kind. It's time for them to pay for their repeated weaknesses.*

"Your orders, sir?" said the sandtrooper.

"Tell Mr. and Mrs. Lars that they seem to have trouble keeping protocol droids on their property."

Not certain if he had heard correctly, the sandtrooper said, "Sir?"

"Then you may extend to them every courtesy that you showed the Jawas before you continue your search. Establish checkpoints to detain any droids entering Mos Espa or Mos Eisley spaceports. And one more thing."

"Yes, Sir?"

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“Do not stop transmitting until I break the connection.”

“Understood,” said the sandtrooper.

Vader watched the sandtroopers carry out his orders on their helpless victims. He found the sight of rising flames—even holograms of flames burning millions of light years away—to be most satisfying.

When the Lars family homestead had been transformed into an inferno, Vader deactivated the holo projector. He proceeded to the nearest lift tube, and was quickly transported to sublevel five of detention area AA-23, which was reserved for political prisoners.

Time to talk with the Princess.

The door to detention cell 3187 slid up into the ceiling and Darth Vader ducked through the doorway, followed by two black-uniformed Imperial soldiers. Inside the cell, Princess Leia sat on a bare metal bed that projected from the wall. Looming over the prisoner, Vader said, “And now, Your Highness, we will discuss the location of your hidden Rebel Base.”

There was an electric hum from behind Vader, then a spherical black interrogator droid hovered slowly into the cell. The droid’s midsection was ringed by a repulsorlift system, and its exterior was festooned with devices that included an electroshock assembly, sonic torture device, chemical syringe, and lie determinator.

Leia’s eyes went wide at the sight of the droid, and Vader could practically taste her terror. She said, “Keep it away from me!”

Vader seized his prisoner, pinning her arms to her sides while the interrogator droid moved in closer. There was a brief hiss from the droid’s injector arm, then Leia cried out and fell backward, slumping against the cell wall with a thud. “You can’t...” she said. “You c—”

“Your Highness,” Vader said in his most soothing tone. “Listen to my voice.”

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Leia's eyes rolled in their sockets, unable to focus on anything. She stammered, "V-voice..."

"That's right. Listen...I am your friend."

"Wha—friend?" Leia said, then winced. "No..."

"Yes!" Vader insisted, watching her plunge deeper into a hypnotic state. "You trust me, you can confide in me. All your secrets are safe with me."

"Mmmm?" Leia licked her lips. "Safe?"

"That's right, safe. You are safe here. You're among friends. You can trust me. I am a member of the Rebel Alliance, like you."

A look of relief swept over Leia's face as she muttered, "Rebel?"

"What did you do with the Death Star plans? Where are they? The Rebels need to know! Help us, Leia!"

"No," she moaned, closing her eyes. "Can't!"

"It's your duty," Vader urged. "Your duty to our Alliance. Your obligation to Alderaan and to your father. It's your duty to tell us where those tapes are!"

"Father?" Leia said, her eyes still shut.

"Yes," Vader said. "Your father commands you to tell us!"

"Father...wouldn't."

Growing impatient, Vader used his own psychic powers to make Leia believe she was in excruciating pain, but after several minutes, he ended the interrogation. He sensed that her inborn willpower was not only formidable but must have been augmented with certain physical and mental disciplines. She would not be broken easily.

Leaving the detention cell, he went to report to Grand Moff Tarkin in the Death Star control room. Vader said, "Her resistance to the mind probe is considerable. It will be some time before we can extract any information from her."

Just then, Admiral Motti approached Tarkin and informed him that the Death Star was finally fully operational. Tarkin

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looked to Vader and said, “Perhaps she would respond to an alternative form of persuasion.”

“What do you mean?” asked Vader.

“I think it’s time we demonstrated the full power of this station,” Tarkin said. Turning to Motti, he commanded, “Set your course for Alderaan.”

“With pleasure,” Motti replied with an evil smile.

Realizing what Tarkin intended, Vader surveyed the man with new respect. The Dark Lord had done many horrendous and unpardonable things, but it seemed that Tarkin—at least in this situation—was even more diabolically inventive. However, Vader had one concern with Tarkin’s scheme. “Alderaan is one of the foremost of the inner systems,” Vader said. “The Emperor should be consulted.”

“Do not think to challenge *me*!” Tarkin snapped. “You are not confronting Tagge or Motti now! The Emperor has placed me in charge of this affair with a free hand, and the decision is mine! And you will have your information that much sooner.”

Vader had long suspected that Grand Moff Tarkin was insane, but it was not until Tarkin had addressed him just then, without a trace of fear, that Vader was left without a doubt. Vader said, “If your plan serves our purpose, it will justify itself.”

“The stability of the Empire is at stake,” Tarkin said. “A planet is a small price to pay.”

Released from her cell and brought to Grand Moff Tarkin in the Death Star control room, Princess Leia stood against Darth Vader’s chest with her eyes fixed on a wide viewscreen that displayed the planet Alderaan. After Tarkin threatened to destroy her homeworld unless she revealed the location of the Rebel base, she told them that the Rebels were on Dantooine. However, Tarkin was determined to prove that the Empire was prepared to use the Death Star without the slightest provocation.

There were billions of people on Alderaan, including Bail Organa, and they were all about to die. As the battle station’s

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superlaser powered up, Vader felt the Princess quivering with fear.

You brought this upon yourself, he thought.

The green-beamed superlaser fired at Alderaan, blowing the entire world to oblivion.

Chapter Sixteen

After the Princess was returned to her cell, Vader met with Tarkin in the Death Star conference room. Tarkin said, “What of the search for the plans?”

“I am convinced that the Princess sent them down to the planet Tatooine with a pair of droids. A short time ago, a starship made a highly illegal blastoff from the Mos Eisley spaceport on Tatooine after her crew exchanged fire with a squad of stormtroopers. The ship then entered hyperspace, evading pursuit. The droids in question were thought to be aboard her.”

Tarkin grimaced. “And our stormtroopers were outfought, our Starfleet evaded? How is this possible? Whose ship was it?”

“That is difficult to say,” Vader said. “She had false identification markings and a forged registration. Moreover, she was an extremely fast and elusive vessel, probably one of the smugglers who congregate in that region.”

An Imperial officer entered the conference room and reported that scout ships had traveled to Dantooine but discovered only the remains of a Rebel base that had been deserted for some time. After the officer left, Tarkin exploded with rage.

“She lied!” Tarkin snarled. “She lied to us!”

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As much as Vader respected Tarkin's indifference to mass murder, the Grand Moff's rattled outburst indicated that Princess Leia had clearly won this particular battle of wills. Unable to resist driving a splinter into Tarkin's demented psyche, Vader said, "I *told* you she would never consciously betray the Rebellion."

Tarkin scowled at Vader. "Terminate her... immediately!"

Vader moved across the conference room to a communications console. With his helmet facing the comlink, he said, "Detention Area Security. Schedule the prisoner in cell 3187 for execution in one standard hour."

"Yes, Lord Vader," answered a voice from the comlink.

Glaring at Vader's back, Tarkin said, "I said *immediately*, Lord Vader."

Vader was about to respond when a comlink buzzed on the table in front of Tarkin. He pushed a button and said, "Yes?"

From the comlink, an Imperial officer announced, "We've captured a freighter entering the remains of the Alderaan system. Its markings match those of a ship that blasted out of Mos Eisley."

Processing the information, Vader hypothesized, "They must be trying to return the stolen plans to the Princess. She may yet be of some use to us."

Vader proceeded to Death Star Docking Bay 327, where a tractor beam had deposited the captured ship. Entering the large hangar, Vader recognized the battered vessel as an old Corellian YT-1300 stock light freighter. He also noted its customized features, including illegal military-grade blaster cannons and an absurdly large top-of-the-line sensor dish on the port side.

Definitely a smuggler's ship, Vader thought as he walked past the squad of stormtroopers who were guarding the ship.

A gray-uniformed Imperial captain and a pair of stormtroopers stepped down the ship's landing ramp. Stopping before Vader, the captain said, "There's no one on board, sir.

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According to the log, the crew abandoned ship right after takeoff. It must be a decoy, sir. Several of the escape pods have been jettisoned.”

“Did you find any droids?”

“No, sir,” the captain replied. “If there were any on board, they must also have been jettisoned.”

“Send a scanning crew aboard,” Vader ordered. “I want every part of the ship checked.”

“Yes, sir.”

Vader looked up at the ship’s hull. “I sense something...a presence I’ve not felt since...”

Since Mustafar.

Then it hit him.

Obi-Wan Kenobi...

He’s alive!

Nearly an hour after the freighter had been captured, Grand Moff Tarkin was at his usual place in the conference room when Darth Vader announced: “He is here.”

“Obi-Wan Kenobi!” Tarkin said with disbelief. “What makes you think so?”

“A tremor in the Force,” Vader answered. “The last time I felt it was in the presence of my old Master.”

“Surely he must be dead by now.”

“Don’t underestimate the power of the Force.”

“The Jedi are extinct,” Tarkin insisted. “Their fire has gone out of the universe. You, my friend, are all that’s left of their religion.” A signal chimed from the comlink at the console in front of Tarkin’s seat. Tarkin pressed a console button and said, “Yes?”

From the comlink, a voice said, “We have an emergency alert in detention block AA-23.”

“The Princess!” Tarkin exclaimed. “Put all sections on alert!”

“Obi-Wan *is* here,” Vader said. “The Force is with him.”

“If you’re right, he must not be allowed to escape.”

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“Escape is not in his plan,” Vader said knowingly. “I must face him—alone.” He turned for the door. As large as the Death Star was, he knew he would find the elusive Jedi Master.

But first, he would make certain that a homing device was placed on the captured freighter. Although he was confident that Obi-Wan wouldn’t leave the Death Star, he was actually counting on the possibility that the Princess would.

Obi-Wan Kenobi, wearing a dirty-brown desert robe with a large cloak, had bypassed numerous stormtroopers and sophisticated security sensors by the time Vader sighted him, entering the dimly illuminated, gray-walled access tunnel that led back to Docking Bay 327. Vader stood in plain sight, holding his red-bladed lightsaber at the ready, blocking Obi-Wan’s path to the captured freighter.

He looks so old, Vader thought, but knew better than to assume that the white-bearded Obi-Wan had weakened with age. As Vader moved slowly toward the hooded interloper, Obi-Wan activated his own blue-bladed lightsaber.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Obi-Wan,” Vader said, edging closer to the elderly Jedi. “We meet again, at last. The circle is now complete.”

Obi-Wan assumed an offensive stance.

“When I left you,” Vader continued, “I was but the learner; now I am the master.”

“Only a master of evil, Darth,” Obi-Wan said.

Although Vader had not expected Obi-Wan to address him by the obsolete name of Anakin Skywalker, it was most unusual for anyone to call him by his Sith Lord title alone. Vader thought, *He’s trying to confuse me!*

Obi-Wan moved fast, lunging at Vader with his weapon, but the Dark Lord blocked the attack with ease. There was a loud electric crackle as their lightsabers made contact. Undeterred, Obi-Wan made a swift series of strikes, but each was parried by Vader.

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“Your powers are weak, old man,” Vader said.

“You can’t win, Darth,” Obi-Wan said, making Vader wonder if perhaps Obi-Wan was taunting him by refusing to address him properly. With incredible self-assurance, Obi-Wan added, “If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine.”

“You should *not* have come back,” Vader said.

Their lightsabers clashed again and again, and their duel carried on until they were just outside Docking Bay 327. As they moved toward the door that led directly into the hangar that contained the captured freighter, Vader heard the approaching footsteps of stormtroopers running toward his position. Vader’s blade was crossed with his opponent’s when Obi-Wan threw a glance into the hangar. Vader kept his eyes riveted on the Jedi. *You won’t get away from me this time!*

Unexpectedly, Obi-Wan raised his lightsaber before him and closed his eyes. His expression was serene.

Vader could hardly believe it. *He’s surrendering!* Without mercy, Vader swung hard with his lightsaber, slicing through Obi-Wan’s form. He fully expected to hear the satisfying sound of Obi-Wan’s ruined body collapsing upon the polished floor, and so was astonished to see only the Jedi’s robe and lightsaber at his feet. Obi-Wan’s body had completely vanished.

“No!” a voice shouted from the hangar. Suddenly, the hangar was filled with the rapid reports of many blasters firing at the same time.

Vader heard the shout and the blasters but he paid them no attention. Astonished, he stared at Obi-Wan’s weapon and empty robe, then prodded the clothes with his boot. *Where is he? How could he vanish? What sort of trickery is this?*

From the hangar, over the din of the blaster fight, Vader heard Princess Leia call out, “Come on! Come on! Luke, it’s too late!”

Vader had no interest in stopping Princess Leia, nor did he wonder who “Luke” might be. But he couldn’t let them get away

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too easily. Turning away from Obi-Wan's fallen robe and lightsaber, he headed for the hangar. But before he could reach the doorway, a man's voice in the hangar shouted, "Blast the door, kid!"

There was a small explosion outside the doorway, and the two blast doors slid out from the walls to seal off the hangar. Moments later, Vader heard the freighter's engines roar to life, carrying the ship out of the hangar and away from the Death Star.

It had been Vader's idea to plant the homing device on the freighter, and to allow the Princess to escape so she would unwittingly lead the Imperials to the secret Rebel base. Vader had been confident that his plan would work. And yet as he picked up Kenobi's lightsaber, he realized that he was now less certain of what the future held.

It was determined that the freighter had traveled to Yavin 4, the same moon where Anakin Skywalker had dueled Asajj Ventress during the Clone Wars. *First Tatooine, now Yavin 4*, Vader thought. Despite his devotion to the power of the dark side of the Force, he had the nagging sense that his past was coming back to haunt him.

Once the Death Star arrived in the Yavin system and was within thirty minutes' range of destroying the moon with the Rebel base, Vader's confidence returned.

"Today will be a day long remembered," he told Tarkin in the Death Star control room. "It has seen the end of Kenobi. It will soon see the end of the Rebellion."

Interlude

By the time the Imperial tactical officers had determined that the stolen technical readouts revealed a vulnerable area of their battle station, dozens of Rebel starfighters had already begun their assault on the Death Star. Tarkin and most of his men had regarded the enemy ships as nothing more than a temporary nuisance, but Darth Vader had felt his confidence shift again as the battle progressed. Vader had never considered the Death Star as anything more than a deadly, oversized toy, but because the expensive superweapon was necessary for the Emperor's schemes, he had been duty-bound to protect it.

And he had failed.

Now, as the Super Star Destroyer Executor arrived in the Endor system, he thought back on what had happened at Yavin four years ago.

With Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber clipped to his belt like a trophy, he had flown his bent-winged prototype TIE fighter to defend the Death Star. None of the Rebel pilots had been a match for him until he had caught up with a single X-wing fighter in the Death Star's equatorial trench. Despite the fury of the space battle, Vader had easily sensed that the Force was strong with this one X-wing pilot. Vader had been about to fire at his evasive target when an unexpected blast from above damaged his own ship and sent him spinning out into space. He had but a millisecond to see that he had been attacked by the same freighter that had led the Death Star to Yavin.

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And then the Death Star had exploded. The resulting shock wave had sent his TIE fighter tumbling further and faster from Yavin. It had not taken him long to regain control of his ship, but because the freighter's attack had crippled his hyperdrive and communications systems, it was some time before he reached an Imperial outpost. Vader had used that time to think about the droids that Princess Leia had sent to Tatooine, and the freighter that had transported Obi-Wan Kenobi to the Death Star. Vader had wondered, How long was Obi-Wan on Tatooine. And why?

Had he been in contact with Owen and Beru Lars?

Did Princess Leia know that he was alive, and that the droids would find him there?

And the Rebel pilot who was so strong with the Force...where had he come from?

The Emperor had not been pleased to learn of the loss of the Death Star, but he had not faulted Vader. After all, Vader had nothing to do with the battle station's flawed design. While Palpatine's propaganda architects had launched a campaign to discredit the Rebel Alliance by denying that a moon-sized Imperial battle station ever existed, Vader had conducted his own investigation to identify the Rebel pilot who had destroyed the Death Star, and devised a plan to lure the Rebels to the Starship Yards of Fondor.

Vader had failed to capture the Rebel spy who took the bait at Fondor, but through the Force, Vader had sensed that the spy was the pilot who had eluded him at the Death Star, and that this individual had indeed been a disciple of Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Eventually, he had learned the pilot's name.

Chapter Seventeen

Luke Skywalker.

According to municipal records obtained from the settlement of Anchorhead on Tatooine, that was the name on the registration for a T-16 skyhopper owned by a human male pilot who had lived at the Lars homestead and was approximately nineteen standard years old.

Luke Skywalker.

According to a Kubaz freelance spy in Mos Eisley, that was the name on a Spaceport Speeders sales record for the landspeeder that had been purchased from a young man who later left on the *Millennium Falcon*, the Corellian freighter that had also carried Obi-Wan Kenobi to the Death Star.

Luke Skywalker.

According to a captured Rebel whom Darth Vader interrogated on the planet Centares, that was the name of the X-wing pilot who had destroyed the Death Star.

Luke Skywalker.

Even while inspecting his nearly completed flagship, the Super Star Destroyer *Executor*, at the Starship Yards of Fondor, Vader could not get Luke Skywalker out of his mind. He silently chewed on the name, and considered the fact that the boy had been born three years *after* the death of Shmi Skywalker. To the

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best of his knowledge, Anakin Skywalker had been his mother's only living blood relative.

Could there have been other Skywalkers from Tatooine? Vader allowed the possibility. After all, it wasn't an entirely uncommon name in the galaxy.

But Anakin and Padmé Amidala had been expecting a baby nineteen years ago.

Nineteen standard years.

It's not possible, Vader thought. *I killed Padmé. The baby died with her.*

Not for the first time, he wondered if the Emperor had told him the whole truth about Padmé's death. *But I remember choking her...seeing her collapse on Mustafar. I was so angry with her. And yet...*

Luke Skywalker exists.

Vader refused to believe that the notorious Rebel's surname was merely a bizarre coincidence. If he had possessed any other name, Vader would not have hesitated to report what he had learned to the Emperor. But for purely selfish reasons, Vader kept the Rebel's name to himself. To him, Luke Skywalker was more than a mystery to be solved.

He is...an opportunity. As strong with the Force as he may be, he is an opportunity...an opportunity for even greater power.

But who is he? Who were his parents? Could he have been Obi-Wan's son? But then why was he named Skywalker and raised by the Lars family? Or was he merely trained by Obi-Wan?

Because Obi-Wan Kenobi, Shmi Skywalker, Owen and Beru Lars, and Padmé Amidala were dead, there was only one way Vader could discover the truth. He would have to ask Luke Skywalker himself. All he had to do was find him.

After enlisting an actor to impersonate Obi-Wan Kenobi, Vader tailored a new trap specifically for Luke on the desert world of Aridus. Unfortunately, Luke saw through the ruse and escaped. Vader was even more frustrated by the actions of his top officer, the ultimately incompetent Admiral Griff, who

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allowed the Rebel Alliance to evade the Imperial blockade at Yavin 4 and evacuate to a new secret base.

Vader was not idle as he searched and waited for any information that would lead him to Luke Skywalker and his allies. He brought Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber back to Bast Castle, where he also studied an ancient Sith Holocron he had acquired. He oversaw various secret projects, including the development of mind-altering Pacifog on Kadril, the construction of robotic Imperial Dark Troopers, and preparation for a new superweapon in the Endor system. He assigned a Force-sensitive Imperial Intelligence agent named Shira Brie to infiltrate the Rebel Alliance, but her mission to discredit Luke Skywalker was a failure and left her horribly injured. Because Vader still considered Brie valuable, he ordered Imperial medics to replace her shattered limbs with cyborg prosthetics, and offered her to Palpatine to serve as an elite secret operative.

Luke Skywalker was not idle either. As word of his actions spread, many Imperials became familiar with the name of the young pilot who was a leading figure in the Rebel Alliance.

Two years after the destruction of the Death Star, an Imperial governor notified Vader that persons matching the descriptions of Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia Organa had been captured on Circarpous V, a swamp planet known locally as Mimban. Vader was aware of the Mimban legend about the Kaiburr Crystal, a luminous crimson-colored gem that magnified the Force a thousandfold, and hoped to collect this relic along with the captive Rebels.

By the time Vader arrived on Mimban, Skywalker and the Princess had escaped and fled into the jungle. After a close encounter in a cavern, he finally caught up with them at the vine-encrusted Temple of Pomojema, a pyramidal ziggurat constructed of great blocks of volcanic stone for an ancient Mimban deity, which contained the Kaiburr Crystal. Using the

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Force, Vader dropped a stone ceiling on Luke Skywalker, pinning him to the temple floor, while Leia Organa watched helplessly.

“You have a great deal to atone for to me,” Vader told Skywalker, who, like the Princess, was attired in the dark work uniform worn by local miners. Activating his lightsaber, Vader began swinging its red blade back and forth, chopping playfully at bits of stone from the surrounding walls. “I probably won’t have the patience to let you last as long as you deserve,” he continued. “You may consider yourself lucky.”

Turning his attention to the Princess, Vader said, “I expect no such difficulty in restraining myself where you are concerned, Leia Organa. In several ways, you are responsible for my setbacks much more than this simple boy.”

Simple boy? Vader was surprised by the words that had come from his own mouth. Even though he knew there was more to Skywalker than met the eye, and had only intended on apprehending the Rebels, he was suddenly overcome by the desire to kill them. He realized he was losing his self-control.

The Princess picked up Luke’s lightsaber and activated its blue blade. As she moved toward Vader, he abruptly let his arm fall, letting the beam of his own weapon hang limply at his side.

“Leia, don’t!” Luke yelled. “It’s a feint...he’s daring you. Kill me, then yourself...it’s hopeless now.”

Gazing at the Princess with contempt, Vader said to her, “Go on, let him fight for you if you want. But I won’t let you kill him.” Thinking of how Luke had escaped his clutches before, he added, “I’ve been robbed too often.”

The Princess fought bravely, but she was no match for Vader. She used the last of her strength to throw the lightsaber to Skywalker, just as he emerged from under the rubble. Facing the Sith Lord, Skywalker said, “Ben Kenobi is with me, Vader, and the Force is with me too.”

The duel was furious, and carried Vader and Skywalker through the temple to a chamber where there was a dark circular opening in the floor, the mouth of a deep pit. As the battle wore

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on, Vader found himself breathing hard through his respirator. But then, thanks to his proximity to the Force-enhancing Kaiburr Crystal, he felt a sudden surge of the power of the dark side, allowing him to project lightning from his fingertips for the first time in his life. He hurled Force-energized lightning at Skywalker, but his young opponent deflected the blast.

“Not...possible!” Vader muttered, feeling his energy drain. “Such power...in a child. Not possible!”

As Skywalker threw himself at the towering black figure, Vader raised his lightsaber to defend himself. But he wasn’t fast enough. Skywalker’s blade cut through the Sith Lord’s prosthetic right arm, and it fell to the floor, still clutching the red-bladed lightsaber.

Dazed, Vader bent and used his left hand to pry his weapon from the gloved fingers of his severed arm. He was shifting his weight to make another attack when he suddenly had a clear view of the lightsaber in Skywalker’s grip. The weapon’s design and handgrip looked... familiar.

Vader’s head suddenly felt heavy, and as he tried to move forward, he stumbled over his severed limb. The robotic arm tumbled after him as he plummeted into the nearby pit.

He howled as he descended into the darkness, and it seemed like his fall would never end. Throughout the fall, he thought of Skywalker’s lightsaber. Vader would have sworn it was the same weapon that Obi-Wan had taken from Anakin Skywalker on Mustafar. He didn’t stop howling with rage until he crashed in a heap upon a pile of hard stones.

It was over an hour before Vader regained consciousness at the bottom of the pit below the Temple of Pomojema. He tasted blood inside his helmet and silently cursed himself.

He realized what had happened in the temple. The Kaiburr Crystal had increased his Force powers, but not to his advantage. It had amplified his hatred and anger, causing him to abandon his desire to capture Skywalker and find out more about his identity.

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Now he sensed that the Kaiburr Crystal was no longer in the temple, that it had left Mimban.

Along with Skywalker and the Princess.

Vader gathered up his arm and lightsaber, and made his way out of the cavern, where he summoned an Imperial shuttle to deliver him to the nearest medical center. Even as his right arm was replaced, he did not consider his battle on Mimban a loss, for now he knew that Skywalker was more than an opportunity for greater power: He was the solution to his greatest obstacle.

He's the one person who can help me overthrow the Emperor.

Vader had never discussed Luke Skywalker with the Emperor, but he did not rule out the possibility that his Master had learned the name of the Rebel pilot who had destroyed the Death Star. It was only a matter of time before the Emperor broached the subject.

Even though Vader had yet to discover any significant information about Skywalker's heritage, he did sense there was a strong connection between them, and not only because they had both been trained by Obi-Wan. But Vader didn't want simply more information. He wanted Skywalker, wanted him immediately, and wanted him alive.

It was therefore inevitable that the Dark Lord would meet with Boba Fett.

Chapter Eighteen

Wearing the helmet and armor he'd inherited from his father, Boba Fett stood before Darth Vader in a spaceport reception room on Ord Mantell, a Mid Rim planet that had once been an ordinance depot for the Old Republic. The room had a wide window that overlooked the landing pad where Vader's *Lambda*-class shuttle was taking on supplies. Vader's own armor and inner workings had been fully repaired, leaving no evidence of his duel on Mimban.

"You seek certain Rebels, Lord Vader," Fett rasped through his helmet's vocabulator. "So does my employer, Jabba the Hutt. Possibly in satisfying him, I can satisfy you also."

"And collect two rewards instead of just one, bounty hunter?" said Vader, not missing a trick. "A particular Rebel interests me...Luke Skywalker."

Boba Fett gave a slight nod, tilting his helmet forward. "A companion of the man I'm after...Han Solo. One might lure the other, Lord Vader."

By now, Vader was familiar with the name of the captain of the *Millennium Falcon*, the ship that had fired upon his TIE fighter at the Death Star battle. He was not interested in why Jabba the Hutt wanted Han Solo, but behind his black mask, he felt a grin twitch across his lips as he considered using Solo as bait for

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Skywalker. "You are enterprising, Fett," he said as he turned for a lift tube that led down to the landing pad. "Perhaps we will meet again when your enterprise bears fruit."

Leaving Fett on Ord Mantell, Vader returned to the *Executor*. Although he would be pleased if the bounty hunter's plan worked, he was unwilling to wait for information leading to the location of the new base for the Rebel Alliance. Finding Luke Skywalker had become more than a goal for Darth Vader. It had become his *purpose*.

Already, thousands of sensor-laden Imperial probe droids had been dispersed to remote worlds throughout the galaxy, and thousands more would be deployed within the coming weeks. Sooner or later, one of those probe droids would turn up something useful.

Three standard years had passed since the Death Star's destruction when Vader, standing on the bridge of the *Executor*, learned that a probe droid had transmitted images of a large power generator on an ice planet in the distant Hoth system. "That's it," Vader said. "The Rebels are there." He refused to listen to his pompous chief officer, Admiral Ozzel, who suggested the probe droid could have turned up anything other than the Rebel base. "That *is* the system," he insisted. "Set your course for the Hoth system."

Unfortunately, the Rebels had already begun an emergency evacuation of their base, while Darth Vader's armada raced to their destination via hyperspace. Even worse, Admiral Ozzel allowed the *Executor* to exit hyperspace too close to the Hoth system, triggering sensors that alerted the Rebels to the armada's arrival and allowed them to raise a planetary energy field to deflect any aerial bombardment. After relieving Ozzel of his life and promoting the more capable Captain Piett to the rank of Admiral, Vader gave the command to send Imperial troops down to the ice world's surface.

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He's down there, Vader thought with absolute certainty. Skywalker is down there.

To their credit, the Rebels did not surrender on the spot. Their laser-firing snowspeeders swarmed the towering Imperial All Terrain Armored Transports that lumbered over the ice and snow, and their planetary ion cannon managed to disable the orbiting Imperial starships long enough for most of their fleet to escape into space. But in the end, they were unable to prevent the AT-ATs from destroying their power generators, and wave after wave of superior Imperial firepower ensured that the Rebels could never win the day.

It was hardly a victory for Vader, who landed on Hoth while the battle was still raging. The last of the Rebels were still fleeing from their vanquished base when he entered a cavernous, ice-walled hangar with a squad of snowtroopers, just in time to see the *Millennium Falcon* launching at high speed. Vader did not know whether Luke Skywalker had boarded Han Solo's freighter, but quickly sensed that Skywalker was still alive.

He had not forgotten Boba Fett's plan.

Turning to a snowtrooper, Vader said, "Alert Admiral Piett and all Star Destroyers that the *Millennium Falcon* is attempting to leave Hoth. Our primary objective is the capture of that freighter. The passengers are not to be harmed!"

Vader returned to the *Executor* and was seated in his meditation chamber when Admiral Piett entered his sanctum. As the robotic clamp lowered his helmet over his scarred head, Vader sensed Piett's discomfort at the sight of the Sith Lord's wounds. When the helmet was in place, Vader's seat rotated within the chamber until he faced Piett, who reported, "Our ships have sighted the *Millennium Falcon*, Lord. But...it has entered an asteroid field, and we cannot risk—"

"Asteroids do not concern me, Admiral," Vader interrupted. "I want that ship, not excuses."

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Knowing better than to disagree with Vader, Piett said, “Yes, Lord.”

The upper hemisphere of the meditation chamber descended over Vader. Hoping to gain some insight into events to come, he breathed slowly as he cleared his mind of all thoughts, opening himself to the dark side of the Force...

Skywalker.

He heard the name in his mind, as if the Force itself had whispered it to him. *But is it the Force*, Vader wondered, *or am I too preoccupied with finding—*

Suddenly, Vader sensed a disturbance in the Force. And not just a subtle fluctuation. Something major was about to happen, something incredibly significant...

Something that will change everything.

Asteroids were pummeling the Imperial fleet as Vader continued the search for the *Millennium Falcon*. Vader was on the bridge of the *Executor* when a very nervous Admiral Piett reported that the Emperor had commanded Vader to contact him.

Proceeding to his personal quarters, Vader stepped down to a circular black panel on the floor below his meditation chamber. The panel was a HoloNet scanner that allowed him to transmit communications across the galaxy. As he dropped to his left knee and bowed his helmeted head, the panel’s outer ring became illuminated in a pale blue light. Vader slowly lifted his gaze to the empty air before him, and the emptiness was instantly filled by a large, flickering hologram of Emperor Palpatine’s cloaked head.

“What is thy bidding, my Master?”

From light years away, on Coruscant, the Emperor replied, “There is a great disturbance in the Force.”

“I have felt it,” Vader said.

“We have a new enemy. The young Rebel who destroyed the Death Star. I have no doubt this boy is the offspring of Anakin Skywalker.”

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Offspring?! The surviving tissue in Vader's throat suddenly went dry. Through his shock, he managed to say, "How is that possible?"

Without offering any explanation to support his stated conviction, the Emperor answered, "Search your feelings, Lord Vader. You will know it to be true. He could destroy us."

Having fought Luke Skywalker on Mimban, Vader was even more aware of the young man's powers than was the Emperor. But he also knew something else: Luke was as ignorant of their familial connection as Vader had been. *If he had known the truth on Mimban*, Vader thought, *I would have sensed it*. Still grappling with the Emperor's declaration, he struggled to find words that might discourage his Master's interest in Skywalker. "He is just a boy," Vader said. "Obi-Wan can no longer help him."

The Emperor believed otherwise. "The Force is strong with him," he said. "The son of Skywalker must not become a Jedi."

The Emperor had not said in so many words that he wanted Luke Skywalker dead, so Vader—needing Skywalker alive to accomplish his goals—took a different tact. "If he could be turned," Vader suggested, "he would become a powerful ally."

"Yes," the Emperor mused, as if he had not thought of this possibility. Vader could only imagine what the Emperor was thinking. The Sith had long maintained their rule of two: one Master, one apprentice. Even Vader knew that there wasn't room enough in the galaxy for three Sith Lords, and yet the Emperor's hooded eyes seemed to sparkle as he said more emphatically, "Yes. He would be a great asset. Can it be done?"

"He will join us or die, Master," Vader said. He bowed, and the Emperor's hologram faded out.

Now that the Emperor was interested in Luke Skywalker's fate, Vader knew he had to do everything in his power to find Luke before the Emperor found him. If his own soldiers and even the infamous Boba Fett could not locate the Rebel leaders, then he would have to take more proactive measures.

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Vader sent out a signal, summoning bounty hunters from across the galaxy to meet him on the *Executor*. It was not long before six hunters, including Boba Fett, were lined up on the *Executor's* bridge. Mere seconds after Vader addressed the assembled group and stressed that he wanted them to find the *Millennium Falcon* without killing anyone on board, the elusive Corellian freighter emerged from the asteroid field. The Star Destroyer *Avenger* gave chase, but moments later, the *Millennium Falcon* vanished from the *Avenger's* tracking scopes. It seemed the Rebels had escaped once again from the Imperials.

But they didn't get away from Boba Fett. Several hours after the *Avenger* lost sight of the *Falcon*, Darth Vader received a transmission from Fett, who had employed stealthy measures to find the Rebel ship limping across space with a damaged hyperdrive, on course for the Beshpin system.

Turning to Admiral Piett on the *Executor's* bridge, the Dark Lord said, "Plot a course for Beshpin."

Chapter Nineteen

Boba Fett had already arrived at Cloud City, a luxury resort and gas refinery in orbit around the giant gas planet Bespin, and the lightspeed-disabled *Millennium Falcon* was still en route when Darth Vader's shuttle touched down on a Cloud City landing platform. Preceded by two squads of Imperial stormtroopers, Vader exited the shuttle to be greeted by Cloud City's Baron Administrator, Lando Calrissian, and his aide Lobot, a cyborg with a computer bracket wrapped around his bald head.

Calrissian was courteous and accommodating as he escorted the Imperials through his facility, and listened with attention when Vader outlined his plan to apprehend a group of Rebels. Upon hearing the name of the incoming Corellian freighter, Calrissian's expression remained completely neutral, which did not surprise Vader. Although a background check had confirmed that Calrissian was a former owner of the *Millennium Falcon*, he was also an accomplished gambler.

While the *Executor* remained stationed well out of scanner range of Bespin, the Imperials took up position within Cloud City and waited for Han Solo's ship to arrive. They didn't have to wait long.

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"The *Millennium Falcon* has landed on Platform 327, Lord Vader," said Lieutenant Sheckil, a gray-uniformed Imperial officer. Sheckil was listening to an incoming progress report, and stood facing Vader and Fett in a Cloud City conference suite. "Princess Leia is with Captain Solo and his copilot," Sheckil continued. "There's a droid too. Baron Administrator Calrissian is leading them into Cloud City now." Sheckil smiled and added, "It was lucky the *Millennium Falcon's* hyperdrive was damaged or we wouldn't have reached the Bespin system before the Rebels."

"Our journey to Bespin had nothing to do with *luck*, Lieutenant Sheckil," Vader said. "Remind your men to stay out of sight. The capture of the Rebels will be at my command."

"Yes, sir. I'll—" Sheckil stopped short as he listened to his comlink. "What? The imbeciles!" Trying not to sound nervous as he returned his attention to Vader, he said, "It's the droid, sir. It...it fell behind the group, and happened upon Gamma Squad's position. They... blasted it. Fortunately, the Princess and the others didn't hear the shots."

"Then *you* are the only fortunate one," Vader seethed. "Do not fail me again. Bring the droid here at once. Its memory might contain valuable information."

After Sheckil left the room, Vader turned to gaze out a window at the Cloud City skyline. He said, "It seems your enterprise is bearing fruit, bounty hunter. By using Captain Solo as bait for Skywalker, you stand to collect two rewards instead of one."

Watching the Sith Lord's back, Boba Fett said, "Skywalker would get here faster if we spread word that his allies are in danger."

"That won't be necessary," Vader said, sensing a trembling in the Force from far across space. "He already *knows*."

Sheckil returned with a pair of stormtroopers who carried an open-topped container that held the captured droid's parts. The limbs had been torn from the torso, and a tangle of multicolored wires stuck out from the droid's neck socket.

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“Lord Vader?” Sheckil said, “I-I’m afraid the damage is quite extensive.” Holding the droid’s head up for Vader’s inspection, Sheckil continued, “As you can see, it’s a protocol droid. Probably the Princess’s property.”

Vader took the head and examined it closely.

“The way these parts were shattered by the blast,” Sheckil prattled on, “it’s likely the droid was made a long time ago.”

Despite the wear and tear to the droid’s head, Vader recognized a few small details that indicated Anakin Skywalker’s handiwork. He gazed into the decapitated head’s blank photoreceptors.

C-3PO.

The last time Vader had seen the golden droid was on Mustafar. *I saw you through the window of Padmé’s ship as it landed*, Vader recalled. Holding this relic of his former life, Vader felt waves of anger and loss sweep over his dark soul. His memory flashed to the day that Anakin had found the droid’s skeleton in Watto’s junkyard, and Anakin had wondered if the repaired droid might help him and his mother leave Tatooine.

Vader wondered whether C-3PO remembered anything of Anakin Skywalker. He doubted it. If the droid had had any knowledge of Anakin in his memory banks, then he would have shared that knowledge with Luke Skywalker. But Luke remained ignorant of his father’s identity. Vader felt certain of that.

All things considered, Vader thought as he looked into the droid’s eyes, *I should have left you in that scrap yard*. He had the sudden urge to crush the droid’s head, but then realized that Sheckil and Boba Fett were watching him curiously.

Sheckil said, “Shall our technicians attempt to recover the unit’s memory, Lord Vader?”

Relaxing his grip on the droid’s head, Vader placed it with the other parts in the open container. “The droid is useless,” he said. “Have it destroyed.” He didn’t give the droid another thought as he turned for the door and said, “Come, bounty hunter. I want to discuss our upcoming meeting with the Rebels.”

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After the tremor in the Force convinced Darth Vader that Luke Skywalker was on his way to Bespin, the Dark Lord sprung his trap. He arranged for Calrissian to escort Princess Leia, Han Solo, and Solo's Wookiee copilot to a banquet room where he and Boba Fett would be waiting. A moment after the banquet room's door slid open and revealed Darth Vader to the horrified Rebels, Solo reached for his blaster pistol and fired at the Sith Lord. With his gloved hand, Vader deflected the fired energy bolts, then used the Force to snatch Solo's pistol, tearing it from the pilot's grip so that it flew over the central banquet table to land in Vader's outstretched fingers.

"I had no choice," Calrissian told them. "They arrived right before you did. I'm sorry."

Solo glared at Calrissian and said, "I'm sorry too."

"Lord Vader!" Lieutenant Shekil said with some excitement after the Sith Lord had exited the banquet room and ordered a stormtrooper squad to escort the prisoners to detention cells. "Our search of Princess Leia's quarters has turned up something...unexpected."

Walking fast with Shekil in his wake, Vader made his way through the Cloud City corridors until they reached the spacious, brightly lit suite that Princess Leia had occupied before leaving for the banquet room. Two stormtroopers stood in the room beside two Ugnaughts: short, porcine humanoids who worked in the city's gas refineries. On top of a table rested a storage bin that held C-3PO's dismembered parts.

We meet again.

Staring at the parts, which looked no different from when he'd last seen them, Vader said, "I gave an *order*, Lieutenant."

"Yes, Lord Vader," Shekil said. Gesturing to the squat workers, he continued, "But according to the Ugnaughts, the Wookiee broke into the junk room and went berserk when he found the parts. He brought them straight here to the Princess. If

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the Rebellion is interested in preserving this unit, there may be more to this droid than meets the eye.”

Reaching into the storage bin, Vader picked up the droid’s head. Despite his desire to leave all of Anakin Skywalker’s memories buried, another one surfaced... something Shmi Skywalker had told her son after she had allowed him to keep the droid parts he had secretly hauled into their tiny hovel. She had said, *Unless you’re prepared to care for something, you don’t deserve to have it.*

Behind his helmet, Vader winced at the recollection.

Watching Vader, Shekil said, “Shall I instruct the technicians to search its memory?” When Vader didn’t answer, Shekil added, “Or would you rather have the Ugnaughts smelt the thing?”

Vader seemed to continue contemplating the droid’s head, holding it closer to his helmet so he could see his dark, distorted reflection on the weathered gold surface of C-3PO’s lifeless face.

“Sir?” Shekil said expectantly.

Darth Vader slowly placed the droid’s head with the other parts. “The droid’s parts carry the stench of Captain Solo’s copilot,” he said. “Deliver this box to the Wookiee’s cell.”

“I...forgive me, sir,” Shekil said, obviously confused. “I don’t understand. You...want the prisoner to have the droid?”

“I am giving the Wookiee what he deserves,” Vader said mysteriously.

“Oh,” Shekil said. “Yes...of course, Lord Vader.”

“Captain Solo has an appointment in the interrogation chamber,” Vader said as he strode for the suite’s exit. “Make sure he gets there.”

Vader did not ask a single question of Han Solo in the interrogation chamber that the Imperials had prepared on Cloud City, but he tortured the smuggler just the same. Afterward, he had a team of Ugnaughts prepare a carbon-freezing chamber for Solo, to determine whether Luke Skywalker could survive the

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freezing process. The test was also witnessed by Boba Fett, Lando Calrissian, Lobot, Princess Leia, and Solo's hulking copilot, who had already managed to partially reassemble C-3PO, carrying the droid's parts in a cargo net that was slung across his furry back. With some amusement, Vader noticed that C-3PO still didn't know when to stop talking.

Solo was lowered into the central pit of the freezing chamber, and there was a great blast of steam as he was instantly transformed into a solid block of carbonite. After the block was removed from the pit and Calrissian verified that Solo had survived in perfect hibernation, Vader turned to Boba Fett and said, "He's all yours, bounty hunter." Then he looked to the Ugnaughts and commanded, "Reset the chamber for Skywalker."

The timing could not have been better, for Skywalker had just landed his X-wing starfighter on Cloud City.

Chapter Twenty

“The Force is strong with you, young Skywalker,” Darth Vader said as his prey walked straight into his trap. “But you are not a Jedi yet.”

Luke Skywalker had his blaster in hand as he entered the gloomy carbon-freezing chamber, but he holstered it before he climbed a flight of steps to stand before Vader. There, on the elevated platform that encircled the pit, Vader stood still, waiting for Skywalker to make his next move. When Luke reached for his lightsaber and ignited its blue blade, Vader noted that it was indeed the same weapon Obi-Wan had appropriated from Anakin Skywalker on Mustafar. But it wasn’t time to share this information with Luke. Not yet.

Vader ignited his own lightsaber. Luke swung first, but Vader blocked the blow with ease. The duel was on.

Luke fought bravely, and even inventively, occasionally impressing Vader with unexpected moves. He even managed to leap out of the carbon-freezing chamber, preventing Vader from rendering him immobile. But Vader stalked him through Cloud City’s reactor control room, used the Force to tear heavy machinery from the walls and hurl them at Luke, and ultimately drove him out onto a gantry that extended into the reactor shaft.

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As the Bespin winds tore through the shaft, Luke swung his lightsaber to deliver a glancing blow on Vader's right shoulder plate. Vader snarled as Luke leaped farther out onto the gantry. Balanced on a narrow beam, Luke was clinging to a weather sensor with his left hand as Vader swung hard with his lightsaber.

Luke screamed as Vader's red blade swept through his right wrist, and watched with horror as his hand and lightsaber fell away into the deep reactor shaft.

"There is no escape," Vader said as his wounded opponent edged farther away to cling to a sensor array at the end of the gantry. "Don't make me destroy you," he added, increasing the volume of his voice so he could be heard over the high winds. "You do not yet realize your importance. You have only begun to discover your *power*. Join me, and I will complete your training. With our combined strength, we can end this destructive conflict and bring *order* to the galaxy."

"I'll never join you!" Luke screamed back.

"If only you knew the power of the dark side," Vader said, and decided that the time had come to reveal all. "Obi-Wan never told you what happened to your father."

"He told me enough!" Luke said through clenched teeth as he clung to the sensor array. "He told me you killed him."

"No," Vader said. "I *am* your father."

Darth Vader did not know how Luke would react. He could not imagine that the young man would be more shocked than Vader had been when the Emperor had informed him that Luke was Anakin Skywalker's son.

"No," Luke whimpered. "No. That's not true! That's impossible!"

Remembering how the Emperor had encouraged his acceptance, Vader said, "Search your feelings. You know it to be true."

"No!" Luke shouted. "NO!"

The wind howled, and Vader's black cape flapped wildly at his back. "Luke. You can destroy the Emperor. He has foreseen this.

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It is your *destiny*.” He reached out to Luke, beckoning him to leave the gantry and come to his side. “Join me, and together we can rule the galaxy as father and son.”

Still clinging to the sensor array, Luke glanced down the shaft.

“Come with me,” Vader urged. “It is the *only* way.”

Unexpectedly, Luke opened his arms, releasing the array and allowing himself to plummet into the deep shaft. Vader leaned out over the edge of the gantry to see his son’s rapidly receding form tumble into an open exhaust pipe in the shaft’s wall.

The Sith Lord was certain Luke was still alive. *If he had died, I would have sensed it.*

After Vader left the reactor shaft, Imperial officers informed him that the duplicitous Lando Calrissian had directed all residents and visitors to evacuate Cloud City, and that Calrissian, Princess Leia, and the Wookiee had already escaped in the *Millennium Falcon*. Vader knew they wouldn’t get far, for Imperial technicians had already taken the precaution of disabling the *Millennium Falcon*’s hyperdrive.

Vader immediately dispatched two squads of stormtroopers to find Luke. Confident that Luke and the *Falcon*’s crew would soon be recovered and delivered to him, he made his way to his shuttle and flew back to the *Executor*. Upon his arrival, Vader remained confident when he was notified that the *Millennium Falcon* had raced back to Cloud City to rescue Luke.

Let his allies save him, Vader thought. *And then I shall capture them all.*

While the *Millennium Falcon* attempted to evade the Imperial blockade around Bespin, Vader used the Force to telepathically call out to his son from the *Executor*, “Luke.”

Father, Luke called back.

“Son,” Vader said, and felt a thrill as he realized Luke had accepted the truth.

As the Rebel freighter flew past Vader’s Star Destroyer, Vader sensed Luke’s proximity and used the Force to call to him again.

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“Son. Come with me.” When Luke did not respond, Vader added, “Luke. It is your destiny.”

But then the *Millennium Falcon* vanished into hyperspace. And this time, the Corellian freighter was not carrying an Imperial tracking device.

Once again, Vader had been robbed.

Interlude

Darth Vader had wanted to resume his pursuit of Luke Skywalker, but the Emperor had other plans in mind for his apprentice. After Vader had been directed to oversee the completion of a new superweapon, which had been under construction for some time in the Endor system, he had thought, The Emperor must know I tried to recruit my son to join me against him. He knows Luke could destroy him...and that I cannot do it alone.

And so the Emperor had done his best to keep Vader on a leash, instructing him to work with Prince Xizor, who controlled the galaxy's largest merchant fleet, which the Empire required to expedite shipping requirements to Endor. A Falleen, Xizor was also the head of the criminal organization known as Black Sun. Because Xizor had lost most of his family to Vader's genocidal actions on the Falleen homeworld, he had long desired vengeance, and schemed to discredit Vader and win favor with the Emperor. But when Vader learned that Xizor had discovered his relationship to Luke Skywalker and had attempted to kill Luke, he ended his working arrangement with the Falleen most permanently by blasting Xizor and his personal skybook—a large repulsor craft—out of Coruscant's upper atmosphere.

Construction on the Endor Project proceeded. A year after Vader's last encounter with Luke Skywalker, the Executor carried the Dark Lord to the still-unfinished superweapon.

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Against Vader's objections, the Emperor—following a plan that had been conceived by Xizor—had allowed a computer that contained plans for the Endor Project to be transported on a single, unescorted freighter through the Both system. With the aid of Bothan spies, the Rebels had captured the computer to learn that the largest of Endor's nine moons was generating a powerful energy shield to protect the Empire's new "secret" battle station.

The Emperor was confident that the Rebels would take the bait and bring their fleet to Endor, but Vader was more interested in whatever future lay beyond that probable skirmish. Although he had proposed to the Emperor that Luke Skywalker could be converted to the dark side and join the Sith Lords, he was well aware of the Sith order's long tradition of limiting their number to two: one Master, one apprentice.

One of us will have to die, Vader mused.

Chapter Twenty-One

The Endor Project was a new Death Star, which was suspended in a synchronous orbit around the forest-covered Sanctuary Moon of the gas giant Endor. When construction was completed, the new Death Star would be even larger than the original. Its primary weapon, the planet-destroying superlaser, had been redesigned so that it could be recharged within minutes and finely focused to fire at moving targets such as capital ships. Imperial technicians regarded it as the deadliest invention of all time.

As Vader's shuttle carried him from the *Executor* to the fragmentary framework of the new battle station, he surveyed the enormous superlaser with contempt. *Even if it succeeds where the first Death Star failed*, he thought, *it is an infant's trinket compared to the power of the Force.*

After landing, Vader informed the Death Star's commanding officer, Moff Jerjerrod, that the Emperor was displeased the station was not yet operational. Upon learning that the Emperor himself would soon be arriving in the Endor system, Jerjerrod commanded his men to redouble their efforts.

By the time the Emperor arrived via shuttle to a grand Imperial reception in a Death Star docking bay, Vader had

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received a report from Tatooine that Jabba the Hutt was dead. Evidently, Luke and his allies had successfully liberated Han Solo from the Hutt. After Vader informed the Emperor that the Death Star would be completed on schedule, the Emperor said, "You have done well, Lord Vader. And now I sense you wish to continue your search for young Skywalker."

"Yes, my Master."

"Patience, my friend," the Emperor rasped. "In time, he will seek you out. And when he does, you must bring him before *me*. He has grown *strong*. Only together can we turn him to the dark side of the Force."

"As you wish," said Vader. He had not forgotten how Anakin Skywalker had obeyed Palpatine's command to kill Count Dooku, and had no reason to doubt that the Emperor had already planned a test for Luke to determine whether Vader would remain his apprentice.

"Everything is proceeding as I have foreseen," the Emperor sneered.

As Vader escorted his Master through the Death Star, he wished he could see the future so clearly. Palpatine had lured Anakin Skywalker to the dark side, re-created him as a cybernetic monster, and remained the more powerful of the two Sith Lords. Although Luke Skywalker had defeated Vader at the first Death Star, evaded him on Hoth, and escaped him at Bespin, Vader did not believe his son could resist the Emperor's power.

Luke has to join me. I cannot lose again.

The new Death Star's construction continued. Vader had just learned that Rebel ships had assembled in the Sullust system when he was summoned to the Emperor's throne room. Perched atop a highly shielded tower at the station's north pole, the throne room had large circular windows that allowed the Emperor a wide view of the forest moon and the battle station's upper hemisphere. The throne itself was a high-backed seat that

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was set atop a broad, elevated platform. The back of the seat faced Vader as he mounted the steps that led to the throne.

“What is thy bidding, my Master?”

Swiveling in his throne to look at Vader, the Emperor said, “Send the fleet to the far side of Endor. There it will stay until called for.”

“What of the reports of the Rebel fleet massing near Sullust?”

“It is of no concern,” the Emperor said dismissively. “Soon the Rebellion will be crushed and young Skywalker will be one of us! Your work here is finished, my friend. Go to the command ship and await my orders.”

Soon after Vader returned to the bridge of the *Executor*, he was looking through a viewport when he saw a *Lambda*-class shuttle approaching Endor. The shuttle had transmitted an older Imperial code for clearance, but Vader permitted the ship to proceed to the forest moon. *Luke is on that ship*, he sensed with utmost certainty.

Although the Emperor had instructed Vader to remain on the *Executor*, Vader was compelled to report this latest development in person. After returning to the Emperor’s throne room on the Death Star, Vader noticed that the Emperor actually seemed surprised to hear that Luke had arrived on Endor.

“Are you sure?” the Emperor asked.

“I have *felt* him, my Master.”

“Strange that I have not,” the Emperor said warily. “I wonder if your feelings on this matter are clear, Lord Vader.”

“They are clear, my Master.”

“Then you must go to the Sanctuary Moon and wait for him.”

Skeptical, Vader asked, “He will come to me?”

“I have foreseen it. His compassion for you will be his undoing. He will come to you, and then you will bring him before me.”

“As you wish,” Vader said. As he strode out of the throne room, he thought, *If the Emperor could not detect Luke’s arrival,*

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perhaps he has grown weak with age. If only I could take Luke far from here to persuade him to ally with me...

For a moment, Vader allowed himself to imagine a future with his son. He imagined Luke as his apprentice—I would teach him everything—and as his partner—he would keep me strong! There would be no rivalry or secrets between them. With their bond of blood and shared power, they would be the greatest of Sith Lords.

We would be invincible. I will take him to Bast Castle and—

Vader remembered the vision that had come to him when he'd left Coruscant for Endor, the vision of his meeting with Luke at his fortress on Vjun. In that vision, Luke had joined him, and the Emperor had arrived with fire and death. Vader realized it didn't matter whether the vision had been a nightmare, premonition, psychic warning, or delusion, because it was a revelation of an event that could never transpire.

There is nowhere Luke and I could go. Nowhere we could hide.

Powerless to disobey his Master, Vader proceeded to his shuttle.

The largest Imperial structure on the Sanctuary Moon was the energy shield generator, a four-sided pyramidal tower that supported a wide focus dish that projected a deflector shield around the orbital Death Star. Near this generator stood an elevated landing platform, which was illuminated by brilliant floodlights. A large area of natural forest had been cleared to accommodate both the generator and the platform, something that had not gone over well with the indigenous Ewok population.

A four-legged All Terrain Armored Transport walked along the edge of the forest and lurched toward the landing platform as Vader's shuttle touched down. After Vader disembarked, he went to a gantry to greet the AT-AT. The AT-AT's hatch slid up to reveal an Imperial Commander, three stormtroopers, and Luke Skywalker, whose wrists were secured by binders.

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Luke had surrendered to the soldiers. He was dressed in a form-fitting black uniform, and Vader wondered if this might in any way suggest that Luke had already surrendered to the dark side as well. *No*, he thought. *Not yet.*

The soldiers presented Luke's lightsaber to Vader, who glanced at Luke's gloved right hand. *A new lightsaber*, he thought, *and a new hand. Just as in my vision of Bast Castle.*

After taking the proffered lightsaber, the Dark Lord said, "The Emperor has been expecting you."

"I know, Father."

Vader realized he actually enjoyed hearing Luke refer to him as *father*. Vader said, "So you have accepted the truth."

"I've accepted the truth that you were once Anakin Skywalker, my father."

Foolish boy. Facing Luke, Vader gave his son a hard stare through dark lenses as he said, "That name no longer has any meaning for me."

Luke tried to convince Vader that there was still good in him. He pleaded with his father to come with him, away from the forest moon and the Emperor.

"You don't know the power of the dark side," Vader said. "I must obey my Master."

"I will not turn," Luke vowed, "and you'll be forced to kill me."

I've done worse things, Vader thought. He said, "If that is your destiny—"

"Search your feelings, Father," Luke interrupted. "You can't do this. I feel the conflict within you. Let go of your hate."

If only I could, Vader thought. *If only I could.* He said, "It is too late for me, Son." Summoning two stormtroopers to lead Luke to the waiting shuttle, he added, "The Emperor will show you the true nature of the Force. He is your Master now."

Wearing an expression of sad resolve, Luke said, "Then my father is truly dead."

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As Luke was escorted to the shuttle, Vader thought, *I must obey my Master. Even if it means the death of my son.*
And even if it means the death of me.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Vader delivered Luke to the tower atop the Death Star, where the Emperor—without rising from his throne—used the Force to release Luke from his binders. After Palpatine ordered his red-armored Royal Guards to leave the throne room, Vader presented Luke's new lightsaber for inspection. The Emperor was confident that Luke would join him as his father had.

Unimpressed by the Emperor, Luke refused to be converted to the dark side. However, his confidence was badly shaken when the Emperor confessed that it was he who had allowed the Rebel Alliance to learn the location of the Death Star and its shield generator, and that the Empire was completely prepared to deal with the imminent attack from the Rebel fleet.

As Luke looked through the throne room's tall windows to see the arrival of the Rebel ships, Vader sensed his son's increased anxiety. The space battle progressed, and it was obvious that the Rebel ships were greatly outnumbered by Imperial fighters. While the Emperor remained seated upon his throne, he taunted Luke, urging him to take back his lightsaber and give in to his anger. Again, Luke refused.

But then the Emperor revealed that the Death Star's superlaser was operational, and issued a command for the gunners to fire at will. An intense beam shot out from the Death

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Star toward a large Rebel cruiser, which exploded in a blinding flash.

The Emperor continued to goad Luke into retrieving his lightsaber. "Strike me down with all of your *hatred*," the Emperor spat, "and your journey to the dark side will be complete."

Using the Force, Luke snatched up his weapon, activated its blade, and swung fast at the Emperor's head. But Vader moved faster, activating his own lightsaber to deftly block Luke's attack. The sight of Vader and Luke crossing lightsabers excited and amused the Emperor, and he cackled with perverse glee. Vader recalled that Palpatine had laughed the same way over two decades ago, when he had ordered Anakin Skywalker to kill Count Dooku.

I was the victor then, Vader thought as he used his lightsaber to drive Luke away from the Emperor. *And the Force is with me now!*

As their duel carried on throughout the throne room, the Dark Lord sensed that Luke was drawing from his own anger to fuel his attack. From his throne, the Emperor said, "Good. Use your aggressive feelings, boy! Let the hate flow through you."

My Master wants Luke to win, Vader realized with some resentment. *I will not give him that satisfaction. I will not be—*

Unexpectedly, Luke deactivated his lightsaber and said, "I will not fight you, Father."

"You are unwise to lower your defenses," Vader said, as he brought his lightsaber up fast. With incredible speed, Luke reactivated his weapon to parry Vader's attack. Vader swung again and again, but Luke blocked each blow. Soon, Vader was breathing hard through his respirator. *I can't let Luke defeat me*, Vader thought. *I won't let the Emperor have him!*

A precise kick from Luke sent Vader over the edge of the elevated platform. Crashing upon the metal floor below, Vader roared as he felt a cybernetic cable snap in his right leg. Luke tried to distance himself from Vader by leaping to a catwalk that stretched across the throne room's ceiling. "Your thoughts betray you, Father," Luke said. "I feel the good in you...the conflict."

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Rising from the floor below with obvious discomfort, Vader said, "There is no conflict."

"You couldn't bring yourself to kill me before," Luke said as he moved across the catwalk, "and I don't believe you'll destroy me now."

Shifting his focus to the metal supports that secured the catwalk to the ceiling, Vader said, "If you will not fight, then you will meet your destiny."

The Dark Lord flung his still-activated lightsaber upward. Luke ducked the red blade, but was unable to stop it from cutting through the catwalk's supports, which tore from the ceiling and sent Luke tumbling to the floor below. Vader watched Luke roll out of view under the Emperor's elevated platform.

Vader's lightsaber had deactivated and landed on the floor several meters away from him. He extended his hand as the lightsaber flew up from the floor to return to his grip. He activated the weapon's blade and walked down a flight of steps to the area below the platform, where metal girders offered numerous hiding places. Outside the Death Star and on the Sanctuary Moon, the Empire's battle with the Rebels raged on, but Vader could not care less. As far as he was concerned, his duel with Luke was the *only* battle that mattered.

Searching the shadows below the platform for the slightest movement, the father said, "You cannot hide forever, Luke."

From the darkness, the son said, "I will not fight you."

"Give yourself to the dark side," Vader urged. "It is the only way you can save your friends." Vader was suddenly aware that Luke was now thinking of his friends, his concern for them almost palpable. "Yes," Vader said, "your thoughts betray you. Your feelings for them are strong. Especially for..."

Luke was unable to stop Vader from accessing his mind.

"*Sister!*" Vader exclaimed. "So...you have a twin sister. Your feelings have now betrayed her too. Obi-Wan was wise to hide her from me. Now his failure is complete." Moving deeper into

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the recesses below the platform, he said, "If you will not turn to the dark side, then perhaps she will."

"No!" Luke screamed, igniting his lightsaber as he rushed from his hiding place to attack Vader. Sparks flew as they traded blows in the dark, cramped area, and Vader was forced to retreat out from under the platform until they arrived at the edge of a short bridge beside a deep, open elevator shaft.

A glancing blow ruptured Vader's life-support system, and as he fell back against the bridge's railing he was unable to stop Luke's blade from severing his right wrist. Metal and electronic parts flew from Vader's shattered stump, and his lightsaber clattered over the edge of the bridge and into the apparently bottomless shaft. Badly wounded and utterly exhausted, Vader looked up to see Luke's lightsaber angled to deliver a killing stroke.

The Emperor had risen from his throne to stand on the stairway behind Luke. "Good!" the Emperor said. "Your hate has made you powerful. Now, fulfill your destiny and take your father's place at *my* side!"

So this is how it all ends, Vader thought.

But then Luke deactivated his lightsaber and said, "Never!" Flinging the weapon aside, he declared, "I'll never turn to the dark side. You've failed, Your Highness. I am a Jedi, like my father before me."

The Emperor scowled. With immeasurable displeasure, he said, "So be it...*Jedi*. If you will not be turned, you will be *destroyed*."

Still lying against the bridge railing beside the elevator shaft, Vader watched the Emperor extend his gnarled fingers and unleash blinding bolts of blue lightning from his fingertips. The lightning struck Luke, who tried to deflect the crackling bands of energy, but was so overwhelmed that his body crumpled to the floor.

No, Vader thought. *No. Not like this.*

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As the Emperor continued to strike Luke with his barrage of Sith lightning, Vader struggled to his feet. One leg was broken, and the other wasn't working right. Moving awkwardly, he shifted his bulk to stand beside his Master. On the floor, Luke writhed in agony, and was on the verge of death as he groaned, "Father, please. Help me."

Vader watched Luke curl into a fetal position as the Emperor hurled an even more staggering wave of lightning at his victim. Vader had no doubt that Luke was about to die. His son screamed.

Not just my son...

The Emperor unleashed another round of lightning.

...or Padmé's son...

Luke screamed louder.

...but my son...who loves me.

Luke's clothes began to smolder as his body involuntarily spasmed. Suddenly, Vader realized that he was no longer concerned about his own personal future. Despite all the terrible, unspeakable things he'd done in his life, he knew he could not stand by and allow the Emperor to kill Luke. And in that moment of awareness, he was Darth Vader no more.

He was Anakin Skywalker.

It took all of his remaining strength to seize the Emperor from behind, lift him off his feet, and carry him to the open elevator shaft. The wretched Emperor continued to release lightning bolts, but they veered away from Luke and arced back to crash down upon him and his insurgent apprentice. The lightning penetrated Vader's life-support suit and electrified Anakin's organic remains, but he lurched forward until he could throw the Emperor into the elevator shaft.

Palpatine screamed as his body plummeted down the shaft. Still trapped within Darth Vader's armor, Anakin collapsed at the shaft's edge, but heard the explosion of dark energy that consumed the falling Emperor.

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Hearing his own breathing as a rasping rattle, Anakin knew that Vader's helmet's respiratory apparatus was broken. He felt something tug at his shoulders, and realized Luke had crawled beside him and was pulling him away from the edge of the abyss.

Despite his own injuries, Luke managed to haul his father to the hangar that contained Vader's shuttle. The journey was made even more difficult by the fact that the Rebels had disabled the energy shield projector on the Sanctuary Moon, and the Death Star was now under heavy attack. Trying to keep his own legs steady as the battle station was wracked by explosions, Luke dragged his father to the shuttle's landing ramp before he collapsed from the effort.

He's not going to make it, Anakin thought. Not with me.

"Luke," he gasped, "help me take this mask off."

Luke knelt beside him and said, "But you'll die."

"Nothing can stop that now," Anakin said. "Just for once...let me look on you...with my own eyes."

Slowly, carefully, Luke lifted Vader's angular helmet, then removed the faceplate from the black durasteel shell that wrapped around his neck. As Anakin's scarred features were exposed, he was surprised to feel tears welling in his eyes.

It's over, he thought. The nightmare is over.

He smiled weakly, then said, "Now...go, my son. Leave me."

"No," Luke insisted. "You're coming with me. I'll not leave you here. I've got to save you."

Anakin smiled again. "You already have, Luke. You were right." Choking his last breaths, he said, "You were right about me. Tell your sister...you were right."

Closing his eyes as he slumped back against the shuttle ramp, Anakin Skywalker had every reason to believe that he was finally about to embrace perpetual darkness.

Not for the first time, he was wrong.

Epilogue

Initially, there *was* darkness for Anakin Skywalker, a boundless shadowy realm, like a universe without stars. But then, from somewhere at the edge of his awareness, he perceived a distant, shimmering light, then heard a voice say, *Anakin*.

The voice was familiar.

Although Anakin no longer had a body or a mouth with which to speak, he somehow answered, *Obi-Wan? Master, I'm so sorry. So very, very—*

Anakin, listen carefully, Obi-Wan interrupted, and Anakin was aware that the distant light was either growing brighter or closer, or perhaps both. *You are in the netherworld of the Force, but if you ever wish to revisit corporeal space, then I still have one thing left to teach you. A way to become one with the Force. If you choose this path to immortality, then you must listen now, before your consciousness fades.*

Knowing he was beyond redemption, Anakin said, *But, Master...why me?*

Because you ended the horror, Anakin, Obi-Wan said. *Because you fulfilled the prophecy.*

The light was very bright now.

Anakin's first thought was that he might be able to see his children again. He said, *Thank you, Master.*

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Taking the Imperial shuttle, Luke Skywalker had escaped with his father's remains from the Death Star only a moment before the battle station exploded. After landing on the Sanctuary Moon, Luke prepared a very private funeral in a forest clearing.

Night had fallen by the time Luke placed Anakin Skywalker's armor-clad body atop a pile of gathered wood. As he ignited the pyre, Luke said, "I burn his armor and with it the name of Darth Vader. May the name of Anakin Skywalker be a light that guides the Jedi for generations to come."

Luke was unaware of the spirits who watched him from the shadows of the lambent woods. But later, when he rejoined his allies for their victory celebration in the treetop village that was home to the Ewoks, Luke saw three shimmering apparitions materialize in the darkness. They were Obi-Wan Kenobi, Yoda...and his father, Anakin Skywalker.

The Jedi had returned.

About The Author

Ryder Windham's many books for Scholastic include *Indiana Jones and the Pyramid of the Sorcerer* and junior novelizations of the *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* movies.

He is also the author of the nonfiction books *What You Don't Know About Animals*, *What You Don't Know About Mysterious Places*, and *What You Don't Know About Dangerous Places* (Scholastic).

He is the author of *Star Wars: The Clone Wars—Secret Missions* (Penguin), *Star Wars: The Ultimate Visual Guide* (DK), *You Know You're in Rhode Island When...* (Global Pequot) and *Star Wars: Jedi vs. Sith: The Essential Guide to the Force* (Del Rey).

With Pete Vilmur, he is the coauthor of *Star Wars: The Complete Vader* (Del Rey).

He lives in Providence, Rhode Island, with his family.

About the Type

Garamond is a group of many serif typefaces, named for sixteenth-century Parisian engraver Claude Garamond, generally spelled as Garamont in his lifetime. Garamond-style typefaces are popular and particularly often used for book printing and body text.

Garamond's types followed the model of an influential typeface cut for Venetian printer Aldus Manutius by his punchcutter Francesco Griffo in 1495, and are in what is now called the old-style of serif letter design, letters with a relatively organic structure resembling handwriting with a pen, but with a slightly more structured, upright design.